

Harold A. Peck.



BLUE AND GRAY WEEKLY



Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

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No. 10.

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 14, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

AT FAIR OAKS; OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY WINNING OUT.

By LIEUT HARRY LEE.



The old scout had certainly hit upon the right trail. The camp of the Union soldiers had been found. Will Prentiss swung his sword and shouted: "Forward, Grays! Charge bayonets!"

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(Continued on page 3 of cover.)

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The Boys in Gray Winning Out.

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CHAPTER I.

THE GIRL SPY.

The night was a dark one on the banks of the Chickahominy river. Fog hung heavy and dark in the miry bottom lands and obscured the light of campfires which burned at intervals among the trees.

For two armies were maneuvering along the river, the army of the Union under General McClellan and that of the South under General Joe Johnston.

That night of May 29th, 1862, saw the two armies move into position for the battle which took place two days later, the battle of Seven Pines or Fair Oaks.

As yet there had been no decisive conflict. Neither army really knew the strength of the other. General McClellan was utterly unable to gather any accurate information as to the strength of the enemy's line, owing to the clever strategy of the Confederate generals.

This had led him to move with great caution. But it was inevitable that a clash must soon come, as it did a few days later.

Near the hour of midnight there was a rustling sound in the undergrowth at a certain point on the river bank and down to the water's edge crept a figure.

It stood there a moment in silhouette against the fog, a darker object, and therefore distinguishable within a radius of a few yards.

For a long time the figure remained there silent, alert and motionless.

Across the river could be heard the sounds of camp life. Once the call of the sentry could be heard:

"Number four! Twelve of the clock, and all's well!"

Far into the distance went that cry echoing and re-echoing: "All's well!" It carried assurance of safety to the drowsy soldier by the campfire. It played a monotone in his brain which soon carried him into dreamland.

But just then a light splash sounded in the black current of the river.

Out from the fog shot the outlines of a canoe. It had a single occupant.

The figure in waiting on the river bank straightened up, and a faint whistle rose on the air. It was answered by the one in the canoe.

The light craft came in nearer to the river bank. Presently it grated upon the gravel and then the occupant sprang up and gained the shore. The canoe was pulled far up.

Then the strange figure in waiting came forward eagerly: "It is you, Nell! I am sure of it!"

"You may be sure, Fred Randolph. Where is my brother Will?"

"He was unable to come, Nell. I am his representative. What have you to say?"

The alert figure on the river bank was that of a young girl. Though her face could not be seen, it was easy to assume from her voice and manner that she was not of ordinary mould. She made reply:

"I am sorry, Fred! Why did he not come? I want to see him very much!"

"It was quite impossible for him to leave camp at present. The Virginia Grays are in a very dangerous position near Old Tavern. We are waiting orders, which may come at any moment, and Captain Will Prentiss must be ready to receive them."

"Your explanation is plain enough, Lieutenant Randolph. While I would like to see my brother very much, yet if it is not feasible I must yield to fate. I ask you to give him this package."

The tall young lieutenant, who wore a handsome uniform of gray, bowed low and said:

"I will be pleased to execute your bidding, Miss Nellie. But I would like to ask what you have learned that is new."

"Everything!" was the reply. "I would indeed be a poor spy if, with all the opportunity I have had, I did not get at the truth. We are upon the eve of a great battle. General McClellan is determined to advance upon Richmond."

"Indeed! That is bad!"

"Pshaw! it will be a hollow victory if he takes the city. The Confederacy has nothing which he can destroy. We will make a counter move upon Washington, which will send McClellan hastily back to his lair."

"Then the chances are that he will not succeed in his purpose."

"Just so! General Johnston already has his plans formed to give the Yankees a crushing defeat. I have sent him important information this very day."

The girl spy lowered her voice to a whisper, for the Union pickets were but a few rods away on the other bank of the stream.

"The Union forces have crossed the Chickahominy, which is the most fatal move they could have made. We shall blow up their bridges and then descend upon them with such force as to drive them into the river. If possible Longstreet and Hill will move forward to-morrow."

Lieutenant Randolph, of the Virginia Grays, gave a little exclamation of pleasure.

"Capital!" he cried. "It will be another Bull Run. We will drive them into the river this time."

"Just so! Now it is intended to move out with Longstreet and Hill on the Williamsburg turnpike, while Huger will attack the enemy's left flank, and General Smith at Old Tavern will assail their right. We hope for victory."

"We shall pray for that," said Lieutenant Randolph. "I will deliver this packet to Captain Prentiss as you request. You will not accompany me to Old Tavern?"

"I cannot do so," replied the girl spy. "My horse is tethered in the swamp a mile beyond here——"

"Do you have no fear in penetrating these wilds alone?"

"Indeed, no!" replied the girl spy. "Why should I? I am well armed. In my disguise of a Union soldier I am not likely to be questioned. I have much work to do for the Confederacy. No man or woman, boy or girl, should be idle while our cause is in danger!"

"I respect your sentiments," said Lieutenant Randolph, removing his cap. "I wish you good-night, Miss Prentiss!"

"Sh, not so loud! Good-night!"

One moment the girl spy hesitated. Then she turned and vanished in the darkness of the woods.

The young Confederate lieutenant placed a hand on the gunwale of his canoe to push it into the water.

But he paused. A startling sound came to his ears.

It was a faint murmur of voices and the splash of oars. The next moment a long shadowy figure shot by in the fog.

It was a boat and Randolph drew a deep breath as he saw that it contained the figures of a dozen men in uniform. They were doubtless Union soldiers.

To have been discovered by them would have meant death or capture. He paused until they were gone and he felt sure that the coast was again clear.

Then gently he shot the canoe into the current.

He paddled softly for a while until the dim glimmer of the Union campfires was completely swallowed up in the fog. For a long time he paddled up the sluggish current of the stream.

It was near morning when he finally shot the light craft into some reeds, and stepping out struck into a path in the woods.

He followed this until he emerged from the woods and came into a field. He crossed this and came to a highway.

There were cross roads, and on a post was a sign which read in the early morning light: "Old Tavern."

He took the road and pressed on rapidly. It was not long before the sun rising began to lift the fog.

Suddenly in the road before him he saw a gray uniform. A sentinel called out sharply:

"Halt!"

But Lieutenant Randolph held up his hand and said:

"For home and honor!"

The sentinel at once lowered his bayonet as he got the countersign and made a quick salute. The young Confederate lieutenant passed on.

In a few moments he came in sight of a camp. White tents were grouped in the edge of the woods.

This was the camp of an independent young company of Virginia youths who had banded themselves together to fight for the Confederacy. They were all sons of the first families in the State, and the highest sense of honor had impelled them to take up arms. They believed they were fighting in a just cause for the honor and the salvation of their country, just as the Northern boy was fighting for the cause of the North.

The great American Civil War must go down into the ages as one of the saddest and most regrettable conflicts between man and man that history records. At this late day

it seems inconceivable that such an extremity should have been reached.

But at that time there were formidable circumstances, powerful motives and a class feeling which is not known or understood to-day. It was one of those awful cataclysms of human passion which cannot be averted, which must transpire and which, despite the awful cost, results in a lesson of benefit to posterity.

Upon the staff of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate leader, was Colonel Jeff Prentiss, a wealthy and much-respected planter, who had a fine plantation on the James river and also a town house in Richmond.

Colonel Prentiss' family consisted only of a son and daughter—Will Prentiss, a bright and handsome youth who was at the outbreak of the war attending school in a beautiful New York town known as Fairdale, and Nellie Prentiss, an accomplished young woman, widely known and beloved.

At once Will Prentiss left school and started for home. It was a sad hour when he bade farewell to his schoolmate and chum Jack Clark, a Northern boy, who also took up the cause of the North.

They had been the warmest of friends and now were to meet henceforth as foes.

Will at once organized a young company called the Virginia Grays. He was made its captain, and they marched to the front to fight for the Southern cause.

Jack Clark, his chum, became captain of the Fairdale Blues and participated in the fighting about Washington until he was finally, with his company, sent to Tennessee under Grant and Sherman.

Nellie Prentiss, the beautiful young Southern girl, possessed of all the temperament and spirit of her sisters of the South, could not remain idle while her father and brother were fighting.

She at once took up the arduous occupation of a spy and thus far had done wonderful and valuable service for General Beauregard and the other leaders of the Confederacy.

Will Prentiss was captain of the Grays, Fred Randolph was first lieutenant and Dick Walton second lieutenant. Joe Spotswood was first sergeant and Sam Payton was a corporal. All were youths of rare gifts and excellent character.

The Grays were at the present time at the extreme left of General Johnston's line and engaged partly in scout duty.

When Lieutenant Randolph entered the camp of the Grays he was greeted with respectful salutes on all sides. But he passed on and entered the tent of Captain Prentiss.

Will Prentiss looked up from the table at which he was sitting and cried:

"Hello! it's Randolph back again. I am glad!"

"Yes, I am back again, captain," said the young lieutenant.

"Ah, you saw her?"

"Yes."

"And you explained why I could not come?"

"I did!"

"What was her wish?"

"She sent this to you," said Fred, giving him the package. "Probably it will explain itself."

Will took the packet and began to open it. He asked casually:

"Did she give you any information regarding the next move of McClellan?"

"Yes. He has crossed the Chickahominy and built a number of bridges. It is General Johnston's purpose to attack him at once."

Will whistled softly.

"There will be an awful fight if he does," he said. "McClellan is strong and outnumbers us."

"But the river is behind him. If we can destroy his bridges and drive his line back we can defeat him."

"Perhaps," said the boy captain in an abstract way, as he glanced at the letters sent him by his sister. The first he read was from his father and gave him much pleasure.

But he was some while reading the second one. When he arose and turned in his chair to face Fred Randolph his countenance was set and hard.

He handed the letter to Fred.

"Read that infamous epistle," he said. "See what you make of it!"

CHAPTER II.

A FOUL CHARGE.

Fred took the letter and gave a start as he recognized the heading of the Confederate War Department. Thus it read:

"To Captain Will Prentiss:

"Dear Sir—The enclosed letter will explain itself. We recognize the fact that it is an anonymous communication and ordinarily not worthy of consideration. But in these times when all is uncertainty and doubt it is not wise to ignore such a warning without investigation. Kindly make an answer to the enclosed charges, and believe me,

"Most truly yours,

"JEFFERSON DAVIS, President."

Astounded beyond measure, Fred took the enclosed letter and read it. So stupefied was he that for a time he could not speak.

Thus the letter, written in a disguised hand, read:

"To Jefferson Davis:

"The writer of this is a staunch friend of the Confederacy and feels it incumbent upon him to warn the Congress of a certain unsuspected fact concerning a young officer in our army, who has the trust and confidence of our entire people, but who is a traitor and a villain, as I shall show. His name is Will Prentiss. It is known to the writer that his sister is in love with a young Northern

officer named Clark. She poses as a spy in the interests of the Confederacy, but, in company with her brother, is playing treachery. It is known that she has betrayed secrets of the cause to young Captain Clark. Also that Captain Prentiss is only waiting for a safe moment to take himself and his company over to the Union side. Be warned! Hang him while there is yet time.

"From A LOYAL SOUTHERNER."

For a moment Fred was dumbfounded. He read the letter several times and weighed it carefully.

"Who wrote this?" he finally asked.

"I do not know!"

"The handwriting is not familiar!"

"No!"

"It is the most cowardly, lying attack ever made on anybody. I hope we shall find out who has done it."

"So do I!" said Will, as he ransacked his brain. "I didn't know I had an enemy!"

"Nor I! But this is plainly the work of a foe, and a dangerous one, too!"

"He mentions the name of Captain Clark, who was my school chum, but who is now my foe. You know that Captain Clark and my sister Nellie were as good as engaged until the war broke out. This fellow, the author of this scurrilous note, has made capital of this affair. Whether he is sincere or not, he has made an attack upon my honor and I shall trace him down if it takes a lifetime!"

"Good for you, Will," cried Fred. "It is certainly the most unprovoked attack I ever heard of."

Will turned to another letter, the fourth and last in the packet.

"Ah," he said. "This is from Nell herself. Perhaps it is an explanation." He broke the seal and read:

"To My Dear Brother:

"I enclose you letter from Mr. Davis. I have just left Richmond and he requested me to send this letter to you. He would not hint at its contents, but I know that it is something grave, for his face was serious and he scarcely treated me with courtesy. When I left Richmond I was followed by two men who I now believe were secret agents or spies sent to shadow me and my movements. It is all very inexplicable to me, and I cannot believe that Mr. Davis sent them, for he certainly cannot have lost confidence in me. Yet he has acted very strangely. I shall hope to see you at a not very distant day, my dear brother. President Davis, General Johnston and General Lee are making arrangements to attack the Union forces, and we hope to defeat them badly.

"I shall pray God to watch over you and your brave boys and bring this cruel war to a speedy conclusion. I forgot to mention an encounter I had with that odious Maydell, who you remember proposed to me some months ago, and who lost his temper when I declined his suit.

"I met Maydell in President Davis' office. He is now a member of his staff, with the rank of colonel. He had the

audacity to ask if I had as yet seen fit to change my mind. When I made a curt reply his face grew dark and he said:

"In a very short time you will be glad to go down on your knees to me, for I mean to make you beg.

"I loathe and fear him. I learn that brave Jack Clark and his company of Blues is in Tennessee with Grant's army. I do not know of other news. Believe me, lovingly,

"Your sister, NELL."

Will Prentiss read his sister's letter and for some moments sat in deep thought. His face was hard and set when he turned suddenly to Fred and said:

"I think I have the secret, Fred!"

"Ah," exclaimed the young lieutenant. "What is it?"

"Do you remember that Maydell, whom I nearly thrashed for insulting my sister?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Well, he is at present on Davis' staff with the rank of colonel. I believe he is the foe who has inspired this cowardly attack upon me."

"Maydell!" exclaimed Fred with deep reflection. "On my word, I believe you are right, Will. He is capable fully of just such a cowardly game."

"Yes, and he is in a position to carry out his purpose. I am going right down to Richmond now and interview President Davis and confront Maydell. I'll make the scoundrel confess, or I'll make him suffer."

Will Prentiss was filled with righteous indignation. It had been certainly a cowardly game, and he was bound to find vindication.

Will at once proceeded to put on his dress uniform and get ready to go down to Richmond on his errand.

Had he been suffered to do so, the incidents of this story might never have been written.

But fate had decided it otherwise.

Just as Will got ready to leave his tent an orderly rode up. He handed Will orders with a salute.

The young captain took the order and read as follows:

"Captain Will Prentiss:

"Upon receipt of this move your company down the Nine-Mile road toward Fair Oaks Station, as an advance and skirmish line for General Smith. We propose to attack the enemy at once on their right flank.

"(Signed) JOSEPH JOHNSTON, General Commanding."

Will for a moment stood irresolute.

The impulse and the desire was upon him to proceed to President Davis' headquarters and clear up the charge against him. It seemed necessary.

But second thought told him that the order of General Johnston was imperative and not to be denied. Military duty was first of all.

So Will laid down his uniform and picked up his sword. He did not change his uniform.

"What's up, Will?" asked Randolph.

"We are in for hot work," said Will, handing him the order. "See for yourself."

Randolph read the order.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "That is going to be a hot place for us. Garnett is on one side of us and Naglee on the other. If they chose they could move in like the two jaws of a trap."

"That does not matter," said Will. "The orders are to go ahead. We are going to do it!"

Camp was broken instantly.

The equipage, however, was left behind, for the Grays going into battle did not need anything of the kind. In a short while the Grays were in the ranks and moving on the march.

Down the Nine-Mile road they went. To their surprise they heard nothing of a force in their rear, nor was there any reason to believe that there was such a thing.

If the enemy was in force before them there was no sign of such a thing. The Grays went on cautiously.

There was need of caution, as Will well knew. They were only a small body of skirmishers and might at any moment be cut off and overwhelmed by a superior force.

Will advanced his men as far down the Nine-Mile road as possible and then called a halt.

He was inclined now to wait for the arrival of Johnston's advance. Several hours passed and darkness began to settle down.

Fred rejoined his young captain and said anxiously:

"What are we to do, Will? There is no sign of reinforcements. Had we not better fall back?"

But the young captain shook his head.

"No," he said. "We have been ordered to keep this position, and keep it we will. Call the line in and prepare for a bivouac."

This was done, and in a dell beside the road the little company bivouacked. With the coming of darkness there came every evidence of a great storm.

Angry clouds piled up in the heavens. The air grew damp and chill. Soon a drizzle set in.

Will now regretted that he had not his camp equipage. His men would be likely to suffer greatly from the exposure.

About midnight the rain came down. It was folly for the Grays to hold their position, so they fell back until they came to a deserted barn.

Here they found comfortable shelter. There was a heap of fence rails in the barn which made good kindling wood, and a fireplace was extemporized in the barn.

By this fire they dried their wet uniforms. Thus the night passed.

But with the coming of the day there was no cessation of the rain. It fell in torrents.

But the Grays hiding in the old barn did not escape thrilling experiences.

It was that memorable thirtieth of May when the Chickahominy swelled its banks and washed away McClellan's bridges, leaving part of his army exposed to attack by Johnston.

This severe storm was the real incentive for the battle of Fair Oaks. The Confederate general believed faithfully it

would be an easy matter to sweep the Union forces into the Chickahominy.

The Grays, making themselves comfortable in the barn, were, however, not off their guard.

Will detailed scouts and pickets and kept a close lookout for a possible surprise or attack. Thus matters stood when suddenly a picket came running in.

"Captain Prentiss," he said excitedly, "I saw blue uniforms down there by the creek."

A small creek ran down into the Chickahominy. It was not three hundred yards from the barn.

Will at once donned his cloak and left the barns. He was soon in the wet undergrowth by the creek.

He saw several figures in the woods on the other side. He saw that they wore blue uniforms.

They did not seem to be in great force, nor did they seem to know of the near presence of the Grays.

Will concluded at once that they were a body of stragglers. He felt no further fear, but decided to capture them.

He went back to the barn and called for twenty men. These were quickly in line and followed him out of the barn.

Will knew better than to advance openly upon the stragglers. They would vanish in the woods like mist before the sun.

Instead he deployed his men so as to surround the stragglers. They were crouched under the shadow of a big rock and had succeeded in making a campfire. They seemed oblivious of the fact that their fire might be seen and their presence discovered by a foe.

Will and his men crept closer and suddenly the boy captain shouted:

"Surrender! You cannot escape!"

The stragglers sprung up in terror and dismay, and there was a movement to escape. But the glittering bayonets of the Grays held them at bay.

"All right!" shouted a tall fellow who seemed to be their leading spirit. "The game is up! We surrender!"

In a few moments the Grays were among them and they were being disarmed and formed in line.

There were twelve in the party, and the leader, who gave his name as Pete Smith, said:

"We belong to the One Hundredth New York Regiment. We were skirmishing and got cut off by cavalry and escaped into the woods. We have been trying to get back to our regiment ever since."

The explanation was logical and Will accepted it. For this he was afterwards sorry.

Pete Smith and his companions were marched into the barn as prisoners of war. They did not seem to regard their capture as at all a serious matter and were exceedingly cheerful and even jovial.

The Grays had been in the barn nearly all day, when Will called to Fred Randolph and said:

"I don't know what we were sent down here for. I don't know what we are waiting for. I believe we ought to march back to Old Tavern and see if we cannot find an explanation."

"That very thought occurred to me," said Fred. "And I think it would be well to get out of here."

Will had just made up his mind to do this when the cracking of muskets smote upon the air and out of the rain came a picket hot-foot.

"We are attacked, captain," he cried. "The enemy are upon us!"

This was found to be true the next moment. Out of the woods came bullets which imbedded themselves in the timbers of the barn.

The situation was by no means a cheerful one.

CHAPTER III.

THE GUERRILLAS ESCAPE.

Will Prentiss felt that he had perhaps made a mistake in remaining so long in the barn.

His zealous observance of his orders had apparently wrought ill for them. It was likely that the plans of Johnston had miscarried and the Grays had been sent on a fool's errand.

Certainly they had received no support. They had waited a reasonable length of time and were now fully warranted in making a change of base.

But it would seem from the sudden attack that they had lingered too long. The position of the Grays in the barn was by no means a reassuring one.

Will had no means of knowing how large a force was upon them. All that could be done was to stand their ground as bravely as possible.

So the young captain ordered his men to return the fire. In a few moments the barn was being riddled with the bullets of the foe.

The Grays returned the fire as well as they could. But they could see nothing of the enemy, as they were so deeply hidden in the woods.

Bullets penetrating the barn were striking the boys down, and Will knew that something must be done.

But what? This was the question. At length the boy captain decided to make a sally.

He reflected that it would be better to know their fate at once. They might be cut to pieces in the open. But they would certainly be exterminated in the barn.

So he gave the imperative order:

"Fix bayonets!"

The Grays knew what this meant. But there was no hesitation or fear. In a few moments every man was ready.

The big doors were thrown open and the word was given: "Forward! Charge!"

With a cheer the Grays rushed out of the barn to attack an unseen and unknown foe. They knew not what might be the result.

At their head was their brave young captain, swinging his sword and cheering them on. And on they went.

For a moment they met a hissing storm of bullets.

Then they were in the woods. There were rushing figures among the trees. The Grays went down upon them with the bayonet.

The foe fell back, leaving a number of dead and dying behind them. Will halted his men in the cover of the trees.

A remarkable discovery was here accorded him. He saw that the foe did not wear the insignia of the Union army. They wore semi-uniforms, some of Union blue and some of Confederate gray. Their appearance was that of guerrillas.

"Did you observe that, Will?" asked Fred Randolph. "We were not attacked by the regular Union troops."

"I observed that fact," said Will. "It looks to me as if they were guerrillas or bushwhackers."

"They are nothing else, as I believe."

"We have little to fear from them then," said Will with a breath of relief. "Hello! What is that?"

At that moment from the woods there appeared a flag of truce. It was carried by two of the guerrillas.

They approached rapidly and halted a hundred yards away.

"A flag of truce," exclaimed Fred. "What shall we do, Will?"

"See what they want," replied the boy captain. "Give the order to cease firing."

This was done, and Fred, with Joe Spotswood, went forward to meet the truce bearers.

"What do you want?" asked Fred bluntly as he met the guerrillas.

"We ask you to surrender," was the reply. "You are surrounded and we shall annihilate you if you do not."

Fred whistled softly.

"I hardly think so," he said. "We cannot accede to your request."

"You refuse?"

"We do!"

"Very well! We shall advance upon you at once."

"We are ready for you!"

The truce bearer hesitated a moment. Then he said:

"You have a number of prisoners, have you not? One man called Pete Smith?"

"We have," replied Fred in surprise.

"Exactly! Now if you will turn them over to us we will draw back and let you have the field."

Fred was astonished. He looked at the truce bearer for some moments silently.

Then he replied:

"Wait here and I will report to my captain."

"Very well!"

Fred went back to the line and was met by Will, who had been waiting.

"Well?" asked the boy captain.

"Here is a mystery," said Fred. "They demand our surrender. Then they modify the demand and say that if we will turn our prisoners and especially Pete Smith over to them they will withdraw."

Will smiled in a cold way.

"Very clever," he said. "We are likely to accept just such a request."

"What puzzles me is what it all means! Why do they seek the freedom of Smith?"

"It is easy to guess. No doubt he is one of their leaders. Perhaps he is their chief."

"Of course," said Fred with sudden comprehension, "that is easy enough to understand. Well, what shall we do?"

"Tell them that Pete Smith and his men will be sent to Richmond and dealt with as outlaws and guerrillas."

Fred went back and gave the answer as Will had ordered. The truce bearer's face darkened.

"That will never be!" he growled. "We will wipe out every one of you."

With this the truce ended. Fred went back to the line of the Grays. There was a period of waiting.

Darkness was now approaching.

The storm had begun once more to renew its force and the rain poured from the skies. Will decided to march back to Old Tavern.

But before he gave the order an impulse caused him to visit Smith. He found the guerrilla chief with a dark face and apparently much disturbed.

"So you are not really members of the New York One Hundredth?" said Will with sarcasm. "Why not admit that you are guerrillas?"

"Well, have it so!" growled Smith. "What is that to you?"

"Just this, that we shall no longer accord you the privileges of prisoners of war."

"You are not going to hang us?"

"If I exercised my just prerogative I should. But I shall send you to Richmond to be dealt with by the military court."

"Hang you!" growled Smith. "You will never cease to regret it. I will square the account with you!"

"Threats make no impression upon me," said Will. "Guard, see that the prisoners are allowed no personal liberty. Treat them as well as they deserve, but watch them closely!"

"You will need to," said Smith defiantly. "I warn you that I shall escape!"

Will afterward remembered this threat of the guerrilla. At the moment he could not help noting its significance, but he never dreamed that it could possibly be executed.

He now gave the order to march back to Old Tavern under cover of darkness. Down the Nine-Mile road the Grays went in the rain and mire.

In a few hours they had covered the distance and were once more in their old camp.

They had not been pursued nor attacked by the guerrillas, as threatened. When they reached Old Tavern an orderly from General Johnston appeared with a new order from that General:

"To Captain Will Prentiss:

"Retire to Old Tavern. General advance will be made along the line in the morning. Be ready.

"(Signed) JOHNSTON, General Commanding."

Will threw down the dispatch and began to pull off his wet uniform. He was tired and disappointed, as were all the boys, and intended to seek sleep.

But just then Fred Randolph came bounding into the tent. The young lieutenant was much distressed.

"My soul," he cried. "It has happened, Will! In spite of all precautions, it has happened!"

"What has happened?" asked the boy captain in a startled manner.

"He has escaped!"

"Who?"

"Smith!"

Will sprung to his feet. For a moment he was angry.

"My orders were explicit to guard the prisoner well!" he thundered.

Fred held up his hand.

"Blame not the brave guard," he said. "He has paid for it with his life!"

"With his life?"

"Yes, he is dead!"

"Tell me all about it!"

"There is little to tell. When we arrived in camp the prisoners were placed in a tent near the end of the company street. A few moments ago an outcry was heard. Out of the tent rushed the prisoners. Three were shot by the sentries. The others escaped, Smith among them. The dead body of Harkins, the guard, was found in the tent."

"This is awful! And the pursuit——"

"It has availed nothing. They got by the picket guard and are now beyond pursuit."

Will strode up and down much perturbed. It was awkward that this should have happened just now.

The capture of Smith would have gained the Grays much credit. That he should so easily escape was humiliating.

But Will knew that there was nothing to do but make the best of it. The affair, however, called to his mind a fact which he had forgotten.

When Smith was captured a packet of letters had been taken from him. Up to this moment there had been no opportunity to examine them.

Thinking that he might find something to throw light upon the guerrilla's career, Will now produced the packet of letters.

He read several which were of a personal nature and no special interest. Then he came upon one which gave him a most thrilling start.

Thus it read:

"Dear Pete: At the present moment I am about leaving Richmond. It is likely that President Davis will order an assault along the Chickahominy in a few days. Now I know that Nell Prentiss will be at a certain point near Old Tavern on the night of the 30th. It will be easy for you to spring a trap at that place and time. If you catch the bird let me know at once. I have some important information for you as soon as I can see you.

"Yours in secret,

M."

Will Prentiss sat like one in a stupor for some moments after reading this most astounding epistle.

To him it was all comprehensive. The truth was all there in black and white.

Smith, the Union guerrilla, and Maydell, the Confederate attache of Jefferson Davis' staff, were in active collusion. For that the writer of this letter was Maydell there was no doubt in Will's mind.

At the same moment he was thrilled with the conviction that he would now be able to prove any charge made against him by the writer of the cowardly anonymous letter as false.

He had only to show this letter to Mr. Davis to at once prove animus and motive, as well as guilt on the part of Maydell, the traitor.

For he was assuredly a traitor, as his own letter averred.

With this reflection Will also felt a chill of dread as he thought of his sister Nell.

If, as Maydell averred, she was this night at some point near Old Tavern and if Smith knew that place, she was in most deadly danger.

Will's brow knit and he shut his lips tightly.

"Fred," he said tersely, "Pete Smith must be captured. Send out as many men as you can. Overtake him at any cost. I must see President Davis at once!"

Fred gave a start.

"What has happened, Will?" he asked.

"Read this!"

Fred read the letter slowly, and his face showed his deep amazement and horror.

"Nell is in deadly peril," he said. "This is awful. We must find her——"

He never finished the sentence. There was a roar and a thunderous explosion. The tent was rent in shreds. The table was demolished and Will and Fred were hurled to the ground.

When they recovered themselves the light of the campfires showed a scene of wreck and confusion. An exploding shell had struck in the midst of the Grays' camp.

The pickets were coming in with startling information that a Union battery had planted itself not half a mile away in the darkness and were playfully handing out a few shells to the Confederate camp.

This meant a quick change at once to get out of range, and Will instantly gave the order.

CHAPTER IV.

MEETING THE FOE.

It was by no means a pleasant thing to contemplate. To be driven out of their camp at that hour of the night and in the storm was hard indeed.

Moreover Will was eager to get away and carry the warning to President Davis at once. The treacherous work of Maydell must be at once stopped.

But at the moment it was quite impossible for him to do this.

It was necessary for him to give his personal attention to the removal of his company from their present dangerous position.

So Will personally superintended the breaking of the camp.

It was an exciting and perilous time. The rain poured in torrents and the removal of tents and all camp effects was no easy matter.

Shells were bursting all about them. Fortunately, now that the campfires had been put out, the aim of the Union gunners was not accurate.

But, just as the Grays had begun to withdraw, an orderly came up post haste.

"Captain Prentiss," he cried.

"Here!" shouted Will.

"General Smith sends his compliments and begs to say that a battery is on the way here to engage the Union battery. His orders are to fall back for a time."

"Very well, sir," replied Will. "Present my compliments to General Smith and tell him that his orders shall be obeyed."

The orderly saluted and rode away.

A few moments later the Confederate battery came thundering up.

In the darkness it unlimbered and a deadly artillery duel under cover of darkness was begun. It lasted till near morning, with no appreciable advantage on either side.

The Grays went into camp again a half mile beyond.

It was a dreary task driving tent stakes in the wet, and finally they crept into blankets soaked with rain to get a few hours of sleep.

They had, however, chance for but a brief rest. An hour before daybreak the order came:

"Move forward at once by the left flank."

The Grays quickly fell into line and marched away in front of Smith's column. They were now on scout duty, and Will deployed his men and pushed ahead cautiously.

It was known that the enemy were strong near Savage's Station, on the York River railroad. Also at or near Fair Oaks.

The troops at Savage's Station were a reserve consisting of Heintzelman's and Sumner's Corps. The centre of the Union line was Casey's Division, above Fair Oaks. Naglee and Wessel were his support and Palmer's and Peck's Brigades were in easy reach.

General Johnston had astutely studied the whole situation. It occurred to him quite logically that if a small body of men could be sent down the Chickahominy they might easily cut off Sumner's troops and get between the divisions of Casey and Heintzelman.

Of course Will knew that the region was full of spies and scouts and such a move could hardly be concealed.

To make it a complete success a demonstration was to be made on the enemy's centre. Then cavalry would dash in by Savage's Station, and if possible blow up the Union supply trains. Once this was accomplished, a general forward

movement ought to demoralize the foe and throw the Union columns into confusion which must result in defeat.

All this was in the line of clever tactics.

But while this was going on counter moves were being prepared on the other side.

It is safe to assume that the Union generals knew in advance every proposed move of Johnston. It was certain that spies were numerous in the Confederate camp, the chief among the traitors being Benjamin Maydell, of President Davis' own staff.

At daybreak the Virginia Grays were far down the Nine-Mile road.

They saw that other companies and regiments were forming in their rear. Artillery was ordered up.

It was intended that the Confederate general attack should take place at daybreak.

But the rains of the past few days had made the roads a bed of mire, and it was difficult to move the guns.

Will Prentiss and his Grays were now in the advance line of skirmishers. The boy captain deployed his men skillfully.

He was soon under a scattering fire as the Union pickets retired, and they began to feel the first line of Union defence.

The Union generals did not seem to fully comprehend that they were being attacked. There seemed no show of preparation on their side for defence.

But the reason for this was known some time afterward. This was that the Union leaders were possessed of information of every move contemplated by Johnston and had prepared for it.

As Will and his Grays endeavored to press forward they met with a scattering fire. For over an hour they held their place in the skirmish line, steadily advancing.

They could hear the thunder of guns far off on the right as Longstreet and Hill moved up to attack the enemy's centre. It was an exciting time, and the boys felt a thrill of excitement as they knew that their turn must soon come.

Soon they could see the Union intrenchments and the Stars and Stripes floating over them. The Grays now crept forward on their hands and knees, loading and firing as they went.

Whenever a head appeared above the earthworks a musket ball whistled past it or perhaps deprived its owner of life. On the other hand, the fire from the breastwork was hot and vengeful.

It is hard to picture scenes like this in an adequate manner.

Only those who have taken part in battles can fully appreciate it. The soldier who before going into the fight is weak and faint at heart grows calm and dogged. Fear at once departs and a zeal which seems unwonted comes to his aid.

The Grays had been under fire before, being therefore in a sense trained troops. Yet with the shells bursting about them and the minie balls tearing up the earth they could not help a slight tremor.

Will Prentiss, cool and brave, walked up and down the line, exposing himself fearlessly to the fire.

He seemed to bear a charmed life.

The bullets whistled about him. One split the visor of his cap. Another shot a button off his coat.

But his nerve was steady and he only smiled and called out:

"Steady, boys! Keep up your fire. We'll get the order to charge soon. We'll whip 'em out of their boots!"

The Grays, who loved their boy captain, cheered him wildly. Fear was forgotten. Defeat was not to be thought of.

The skirmish line had done its work. It could go no further.

Now the thunder of the main army was heard as it drew nearer for the attack. Longstreet and Hill were to attack the Union centre under Casey and Couch.

Hill had already reached a position in the Union front. He awaited impatiently the order to advance, which came at about one o'clock.

Instantly the great Confederate general sprung into his saddle. He rode forward, waving his sword, and cried:

"Forward, boys! Wipe them out, root and branch! Hurrah for the Confederacy!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah for the Confederacy!"

The regiments sprung forward to the charge. On they went over the skirmish line, which fell into the general line. The Grays were in the front rank.

They had come down the Nine-Mile road almost to Fair Oaks Station, where they struck the right flank of Casey's division.

The Union troops under Casey had only been in their present position but a short while and had failed to properly intrench themselves for the full length of their line.

As a result when Hill's men charged they began to yield. History states that Casey had not really believed that the Confederates meant an attack, and was taken a little off his guard.

However this was, he hastened to make amends and turn the tide of battle. He hastened Spratt's battery of rifled guns to the front of his rifle pits and ordered Naglee to come up with his division.

All this while Smith, the Confederate general, in whose division were the Grays, had come up on the Union right flank.

The fighting now became fierce and desperate. When the Union generals saw that the Confederates meant their attack they threw forward all their available forces.

To describe that bloody battlefield in detail would be impossible.

All that can be done is to detail that part in which the Grays took part. It was the hottest part of the field.

The One Hundredth New York, the Fifty-sixth New York, the Eleventh Maine and the One Hundred and Fourth Pennsylvania came up to the support of Spratt's battery.

A terrific roar of battle filled the air. The scene was an awe-inspiring one.

The Confederate brigades under Rhodes, Garland and Anderson hurled themselves forward to meet the deadly fire of the battery and its support.

For a time the carnage was awful. Men fell in heaps.

Will Prentiss and his Grays, by the best of good fortune, had seemed to keep well out of the fire. They were doing effective firing when suddenly the order went down the line:

"Fix bayonets!"

Every man knew what that meant. To stand on the firing line and exchange deadly volleys with the foe for hours is one thing. But to fix bayonets meant a rush forward, a bloody hand-to-hand conflict, fearful scenes of stabbing and cutting and of terrible destruction of life.

A thrill ran through the ranks. For a moment many felt a giddy sense of illness. But only for a moment.

Then came that dulled sense of duty which knows no disobedience, no fear of death. It was the soldier's call.

"Fix bayonets!"

The order leaped from rank to rank, from file to file, and from lip to lip. Men looked at each other. Some gripped a hand and said:

"If I don't come out, Bill, tell Annie my last thought was of her!"

The Grays received the order calmly. Before them was a steep part of the enemy's redoubts. Gleaming musket barrels were ranged along it.

From their muzzles came an almost continuous stream of fire.

To rush against them seemed certain death. Yet this was what they were expected to do.

Then came the final order:

"Ready! Forward! Charge!"

The Confederate leaders believed that the supreme moment had come. All was to be risked in a charge.

Up sprung the lines of Gray. On they went like a resistless tide. A terrible roar of guns filled the air.

Awful gaps were made in the ranks. Men fell in in weird rows. But when a line wavered another pressed forward to push it ahead.

Step by step, foot by foot, the ground was covered. Nothing since Napoleon's day had been seen like that charge.

On and on went that line of gray. Already the Union gunners could be seen falling by their pieces. New gunners sprung to take their places.

Will Prentiss saw all this and a thousand other things. His brain was in a whirl, his mind in chaos. He was an automaton, a senseless yet moving figure in this great human drama which had tragedy for its finale.

He moved like one in a trance. His orders were given in a short rasping voice. His face was colorless and set.

He saw his brave boys dropping one by one. Yet he never thought of turning back.

The deadly shells tore through the gray ranks. Garland's and Anderson's men reeled and halted.

One moment more and there would have been a rout. But the Virginia Grays, now yards in advance, were by themselves and going on unflinching to the redoubt.

"Look!" shrieked General Garland himself, as he dashed

into the shivering line of men. "See the Virginia Grays! They are boys and you are men! Shame on you! Close up and follow them! On to victory!"

The example of the Grays turned the tide. With a wild cheer, which rose above the thunder of the guns, the Confederate line again swept on.

Up the side of the redoubt they went like a swarm of bees. This time nothing was to resist them. The Union gunners were dead. The Union infantry had broken and were fleeing the trenches.

Wild were the yells of victory which went up from the Boys in Gray. Over the breastwork they went. Down came the Stars and Stripes. Up went the "Bonny Blue Flag!"

Casey's division had been driven from their trenches. The Union general in desperation drew back and called up Naglee's brigade to his aid.

The Virginia Grays were the first in the enemy's trenches. They were about to occupy them and turn the fire of the captured guns upon the foe when an unexpected thing occurred.

Whether Casey's move was right or wrong is not to be disputed at this late day. But the Union general, discomfited by the loss of his intrenchments, called up Naglee's men and gave the order:

"Fix bayonets! Drive them back as you value your honor!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BATTLE OF FAIR OAKS.

So the Grays suddenly saw a long line of gleaming bayonets coming through the smoke and fog.

It was easy to understand what this meant. The Union forces were coming to recapture the redoubt.

Generals Rhodes and Garland exhorted the men to stand firm.

"Don't give ground, boys! Rains is flanking them! We have them beaten!"

This assertion proved true. Rains and his brigade had been sent around to hit the rear of Casey's division and cut off his communication with Heintzelman.

The Boys in Gray, concealed and protected by the trenches, opened a terrific fire upon the advancing line of the blue.

The result was what might have been expected. The Union troops wavered. Rallied as they were, they felt that all depended upon recapturing the redoubt.

Whether they would have succeeded or not but for interference can only be guessed.

But this interference, in the shape of the Confederate General Rains coming in on their right flank, disconcerted them and threw them into confusion.

At once they began to fall back upon the division of General Couch.

Cheers wild and frantic went up from the Confederate soldiers. It looked to them like a mighty victory.

They had captured the redoubt and rifle pits of Casey's division. They had hurled his regiments back and nearly broken the centre of the Union line.

It was a supreme moment. With the six captured guns turned upon them the Union soldiers were in a way for a bad beating.

But that fatal slowness which has marked the evolutions of many an army now militated against the Confederates and finally resulted in cheating them of a victory which might have been made so sweeping as to have turned the whole tide of the war.

On the Confederate left General Smith's advance was delayed by General Johnston himself, who was listening for the sound of Longstreet's musketry, which owing to some condition of the atmosphere did not reach him.

This unfortunate delay enabled the Union forces, under Heintzelman, to come up hot-foot from Savage's Station to the support of Generals Casey and Couch.

But Smith's men held the captured redoubts, though now orders came to detach a number of the regiments to join in the attack on Fair Oaks Crossing of the York River Railroad, where the fighting was getting hot.

General Abercrombie, of the Union forces, was here stationed with five regiments to hold the crossing.

A little after four o'clock the Virginia Grays were in the attacking line at this point.

They had fought valiantly and well all day. But now with thinned ranks they were given a brief respite.

Just then word came that General Johnston was badly wounded, having been struck by a piece of a shell, which broke two ribs and dismounted him.

This for a moment cast a spell of gloom over the Confederate troops.

The death of a leading officer has a powerful moral effect upon troops in line of battle.

Thus far victory had been all with the Confederates. From the moment of General Johnston's fall everything seemed to go the other way.

Will Prentiss and the Grays were stationed in the edge of a little wood near the Fair Oaks Station.

The fall of Johnston was a blow to the brave boys.

"I fear we shall lose the day, Fred," said Will as his young lieutenant approached him.

"You do?" exclaimed Fred in surprise. "I thought we were winning."

"Our general is gone!"

"But General Smith is in command, and he is an able man."

"That may be. But the general attack was too long delayed."

"I fear you are right."

"It cannot be helped."

"By the way, Will, I saw a man in whom you are interested a few moments ago."

Will's face lit up.

"Who?" he asked.

"Can't you guess?"

"Do you mean Maydell?"

"Yes."

The young captain's eyes gleamed.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Over yonder where you see that cavalcade is Jefferson Davis and his staff. He is with him."

Will started up eagerly. The impulse was upon him to seize this opportunity.

"Fred," he said, "I leave you in command while I go over there and——"

But Fred put up his hand.

"Not now, Will," he said. "This is a crisis and a captain should not leave his company while in line of battle!"

"You are right," agreed the young captain. "But I may send a courier. You will go and——"

"No!"

"What?"

"Wait until after the battle. Nothing can be gained by hasty action. Mr. Davis is too busy to give his attention to the matter now, and there is no opportunity to advance the proofs just now."

"You are right," agreed Will. "Oh! What is that? President Davis is coming this way."

This was seen to be true.

The Confederate leader and his staff were riding down toward the Grays. The face of the President of the Confederacy was very white and grave and he was looking away across the battlefield.

He rode past the Grays without even a glance at them. The impulse was strong upon Will to accost him. But he saw that it would be ill-advised.

It was not a favorable moment. As Fred had declared, there was no time to present and prove charges.

Colonel Jeff Prentiss was not with the President's staff. He was in another part of the field.

But Colonel Maydell was, and as he rode by Will he grinned malevolently and saluted mockingly. Will stared coldly at him.

The battle was now hot near the railroad station.

Just below some Union troops were using the railroad embankment for a breastwork. They were holding the Confederate line back.

They had a couple of field pieces. There was a treacherous bog to cross, and though several charges were made each time the Confederate troops were hurled back with awful loss.

It was seen to be a physical impossibility to carry the embankment. No body of men could live a moment under that scathing fire.

At this point there was a slight curve, so that an attacking force was exposed to an enfilading as well as direct fire.

Will watched this point for some time. He saw company after company essay the feat only to be swept back.

Suddenly a couple of men on horseback came galloping along the line. One was an orderly. The other was Maydell.

Suddenly the orderly galloped away, but Maydell rode up to the Grays' line and called out imperiously:

"Captain Prentiss!"

In an instant Will sprung forward.

"He is here!" he cried.

"President Davis orders your company to storm the railroad embankment. You will go forward at once!"

Will stood a moment aghast. He half started forward as if to pull the scoundrel from his saddle.

But he checked himself. He remembered that this was a battlefield and there was a crisis in affairs. His duty was to accept the order and obey at once.

He did not pause to reckon with the fact that annihilation for himself and company must surely result. He remembered only that he was ordered to go to the front.

At once he saluted.

"Inform President Davis that the Virginia Grays will take the embankment," he said. "Forward, Grays! Fix bayonets!"

"I hope you will come back alive," cried the villain jeeringly. "It is another charge of the Six Hundred."

"All right," cried Will with spirit. "I will tell you that there is not a coward in our ranks. Nor is there one who would be guilty of foul conspiracy against a woman."

Maydell's eyes gleamed exultantly.

"You are helpless now," he cried. "You are well disposed of. If you make that charge you will never return. I shall carry out my ends."

"Hound!" cried Will with set teeth as he started for the villain. "I will take you with me."

But Maydell, with a coarse laugh, rode swiftly away. Will felt a touch on his arm.

He turned to face Fred Randolph.

The young lieutenant's face was pale and grave. He asked:

"Are we ordered to attack the railroad embankment?"

"We are," replied Will.

"Who sends the orders?"

"Jefferson Davis!"

"The President!" gasped Fred. "There is no recall, I fear. I say, pard, do you know the real strength of those forces? They have riddled every line sent against them. You will be no exception. Not one of us will return alive."

"I am not so sure," said Will doggedly. "I propose to attack on the angle of the curve. I shall endeavor to cut through and then roll up their line."

Fred shook his head slowly.

"I don't like to pose as a pessimist. But I feel sure that we can never do it. This charge will say farewell to the Virginia Grays as a military organization."

Will made no reply. He turned aside and gave himself up to reflections for one brief instant.

For one moment he felt rebellious. It was hard for him to take his comrades down to certain death.

They were the flower of the Virginia aristocracy. They were of the best stock of the Old Dominion.

If the railroad embankment was carried not a great advantage would be gained.

It seemed like a terrible and needless sacrifice of life.

But it was the order of the President. This could not be disregarded. It must not be disobeyed.

The Grays in line with fixed bayonets were awaiting the word. Will glanced down their line and he scanned the handsome intellectual faces.

It was an awful thought that they would soon be lying dead and mangled in the ditch before the embankment.

But he drew a deep breath and murmured a prayer. He placed himself before them and cried:

"Forward, Grays! Follow me!"

The Grays cheered their young captain and sprung forward. At the double quick they approached the railroad.

But even at that moment Will saw something which had escaped the eyes of the previous attacking officers.

This was the fact that it was not necessary to approach the embankment direct and meet the deadly fire of its defenders.

By a quick dash and a charge upon a small force at the right they could gain the railroad track and charge down it.

Will saw the plan and was quick to adopt it. He gave his boys orders to deploy to the right and move into the woods. Then, with a sudden dash, they could dispose of the Union guard on the tracks and rush down its course and perhaps turn the victory of the Union defenders into a bitter defeat.

The young captain was just as quick to execute as he was to see.

Swinging his sword, he cried:

"Come on, Grays! I'll lead the way!"

With a wild cheer the Grays started on the run. They passed along the line of a waiting company, who cheered them.

It is a thrilling moment for all when a company is sent into battle. Sympathy and interest goes with them.

In a few moments the Grays were crossing to the right and firing at the Union guard. The fire became hot and blue uniforms surged into view.

"Ready, Grays!" shouted Will. "Charge bayonets!"

In that instant Will saw a cavalcade of horsemen approaching at a gallop. In the van was a tall distinguished man, who held up his hand.

It was Jefferson Davis.

At the moment it did not occur to Will Prentiss that he was signalling him. In any event it was too late.

To turn back now would have been to receive the deadly fire of the foe in their rear. To go ahead was the only hope.

So the Grays kept on.

One moment they wavered at the little redoubt by the crossing. Then, with a wild hurrah, they went over the breastwork.

They were among the gunners the next instant, and driving the Union defenders from their guns.

It was certainly a thrilling moment. Jefferson Davis sat on his horse a wondering spectator of what had been the wildest and most brilliant charge of the day.

The redoubt and its two rifled guns was in the hands of the Grays.

Quick as a flash Will turned the muzzles upon the line of Union soldiers along the railroad embankment. He had gained the key to success.

CHAPTER VI.

VILLAINY UNMASKED.

So swift and unexpected had been the move of the Grays that the Union leaders hardly realized what it all meant until it was too late.

From the two captured guns a plunging fire was instantly sent into their midst.

Will Prentiss was far too shrewd and clever to attempt a fresh charge down the embankment. It was not now necessary nor the proper thing.

It was enough to remain in the cover of the captured breastworks and send an enfilading fire into the ranks of the foe.

Jefferson Davis from his position had seen all.

He was deeply impressed with the turn of affairs. It changed the situation, putting the Union troops on the offensive instead of the defensive.

Their move now was to make a counter charge and recapture the flank position which the Grays had taken.

This was bound to be a desperate thing to do. But with overpowering numbers they would certainly have succeeded but for the quick eye of Mr. Davis.

Quick as a flash he sent an orderly for a regiment to reinforce the Grays.

This came up at the double-quick and just when the fight was the hottest. The Union troops were hurled back.

In a few moments they wisely retired from the embankment, and thus one of the Union victories of the day was won out by the Grays.

Thus far they had been winning out in gallant style.

They had lost a number of their men, but the company spirit was still high and they were yet ready for battle.

When the Union troops retired, leaving the Grays and their reinforcements masters of that point, a report came that the Union left had been turned and Heintzelman cut off so that it looked like certain victory for the Confederate arms.

The news caused the Grays to cheer madly. It was a moment of great joy.

But far away in the distance waving flags and marching ranks of men could be seen coming onto the field.

At that moment they were not noticed by the Confederate leaders. Later, however, it was discovered that this was Sedgwick, of the Union army.

With fresh troops and a battery of twenty-four guns he swung into line of battle in the edge of the woods.

The scene that ensued was a terrific one. The fire from the Union guns was something beyond description. In vain the brave Confederate regiments charged and tried to effect their capture.

Each time they were hurled back. Thus the battle raged until sunset.

Then Will Prentiss and his Grays, with others, received orders to fall back.

It was hard for the Grays to leave the intrenchments they had so bravely captured. But it was necessary for them to do so.

Steadily they fell back. Finally they made another stand in the rear of Fair Oaks. The Union line here had position on a crest of land.

Darkness was at hand.

The stubborn conflict which had been several times seemingly a victory for either side was at an end. Orders came to fall back, and with the coming of darkness gradually the firing grew more scattered and so ended the first day's fight at Fair Oaks.

Each army rested on its arms. While the advantage had been with the Union troops, yet the Confederates were strong and eager to renew the fray.

Thus matters stood, when as Will and his boys were engaged in cooking their evening meal an orderly made his appearance.

He brought an order from President Davis, which Will read:

"To Captain Will Prentiss:

"Report to me personally at the earliest possible moment.

"(Signed) JEFFERSON DAVIS."

Will left Fred Randolph in charge and accompanied the orderly to the tent in which President Davis made his headquarters.

He was compelled to wait a few moments outside until President Davis had finished his conference with several others.

Then he was ushered into the tent. The great Confederate leader stood beside a table.

With him were Generals D. H. Hill and Longstreet and General Mahone. Several officers of subordinate rank were also present.

President Davis looked white and careworn. But his eye kindled a little as he said gravely:

"Captain Prentiss?"

"At your service," replied Will, saluting.

"You took quite a prominent part in the fight to-day, Prentiss. You captured that redoubt in grand style. I wish to congratulate you, sir."

"I thank you, President Davis," said Will respectfully. "The Virginia Grays expect to do their duty, despite all insinuations to the contrary."

The Confederate leader gave a start and contracted his eyebrows.

"That is a matter I wish to discuss with you, Prentiss," he said.

"It is a matter which I cannot afford to let go by unnoticed," said Will. "An attack upon my honor and that of my company is not to be treated lightly."

"I am loath to believe anything against you," said Presi-

dent Davis gravely. "But the charges are so insistent and seem to be backed by some sort of evidence——"

"I deny it, sir!" cried Will hotly. "I am a Virginian, sir, and I am bound to resent that intimation, even from you, sir."

President Davis flushed.

"Tut—tut!" he said. "You are too quick, Prentiss. Remember these are trying days for our country. We are compelled at times to distrust even our blood relations. Temptations are great and——"

"I refuse to listen, sir," said Will indignantly.

"One moment," said President Davis as he drew a letter from his pocket. "Have you ever seen this before?"

He gave Will a keen searching glance. Astonished, Will took the letter. He was surprised that the handwriting greatly resembled his.

He read it with amazement.

"To Captain Jack Clark, Fairdale Blues, Alexandria, Virginia:

"My Dear Clark: The time is not yet ripe to strike the blow. You may depend upon me, though, for I cannot see the glorious old flag of our country trampled in the dust. At present, however, I can do better work here. At the right moment we will lay down our uniforms of gray to don the blue. Then for the Union, and my dearest friend. My sister Nell sends you her deepest affection. All is well that ends well, and the end is not far off.

"Sincerely and fraternally yours, PRENTISS."

For a moment after reading this Will's cheeks burned with an angry flame. He turned and faced President Davis.

"Mr. Davis," he said, "you know my father and my family. There has never been a stain on our family escutcheon. To-day the Virginia Grays fought in comparison as well as any troop in your army. Is not that enough to disprove this lying charge, this infamous forgery?"

President Davis' face did not quiver.

"Then you deny that this letter was written by you?"

"I do!"

"Will you tell me if your sister and this Union captain are not lovers?"

"They were friends, and I doubt not there may be a tie of affection between them. At present, however, it can only remain mutual respect."

President Davis nodded slowly.

"Can you prove in any way that you have had no dealings with Captain Clark since the war began?"

"What would you consider proof? I am willing to give my oath."

"Davis," said General Longstreet, "I don't believe that boy is a traitor."

"Nor I!" spoke up General Hill.

"Silence, gentlemen," said President Davis sternly. "Prentiss, what have you to say?"

"President Davis," said Will calmly, "I have a matter of very great importance to present to you. But in presenting it I do not wish to be understood as endeavoring to clear

myself of this charge by convicting another. But my loyalty to the South forbids my withholding the charge against a certain member of your staff."

"What?" exclaimed President Davis, knitting his brows.

"I mean what I say! You were present and saw the charge of my company on the railroad redoubt to-day."

"I was!"

"Did you give the order for us to make that charge? Did you send this member of your staff, whose rank is that of colonel, to send us into what seemed a trap of death?"

President Davis showed surprise.

"No!" he replied. "I meant to stop you when I saw you going in! I thought you went in without orders."

"You were wrong then," declared Will.

"Indeed! Who is this member of my staff who assumed such a prerogative?"

"Before giving you his name I will say more about him," said Will. "He has for a year past been very insistent in his attentions to my sister Nell. She refused his suit and he swore revenge. To accomplish this he has leagued himself with Pete Smith, the guerrilla, to capture and abduct her. The plot was laid for execution last night. The battle prevented any attempt on my part to frustrate it, and for aught I know she may be now in his power. We captured Smith, and on his person found this letter, which will explain itself."

Will produced the letter to Smith from Maydell and President Davis read it. His face grew haggard and his hollow eyes burned fiercely.

"There is treachery afoot," he declared. "I know now why we failed to surprise McClellan in the morning attack. It is this villain who has given him the news. But who is this fellow?"

He looked from Will to the other officers. Longstreet asked:

"Let me see the letter!"

He read it slowly and passed it to General Hill. The latter said quietly:

"I know this handwriting!"

"You do?" asked Davis.

"Yes, it is that of Ben Maydell!"

"Maydell!" gasped President Davis. Then he turned to Will.

"Is he the one who seeks your sister's favor?"

"He is!" replied Will.

President Davis turned to an orderly.

"Find Colonel Maydell and send him here!" he commanded.

The orderly departed. It was a long time before he returned.

"Colonel Maydell cannot be found," he said. "There is every evidence that he has left the camp."

Jefferson Davis clenched his hands. He turned to Will and said:

"Prentiss, you have had a narrow escape. I sent for you with the intention of placing you under arrest. But I can see that you are the victim of a plot. I shall use every en-

deavor to get at the bottom of this affair. Go back to your company and await my further orders!"

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE TRAIL.

Will went back to his camp with tingling cheeks. The charge against him had brought out all the resentment of his nature.

With his high sense of honor it hurt him much that President Davis should even for a moment suspect him.

He met Fred Randolph and told him all. The two young officers had a heart to heart talk.

"Never mind, Will," said Fred. "This charge against you and the Grays can never be sustained. We will win out!"

"Yes," said Will with determination. "Honor before everything. Our reputation shall be cleared. We will win out!"

"Let us at once proceed to recapture Smith, and if possible find Maydell!"

"I fear that we cannot," replied Will. "At least not at present. Every man is needed for the reopening of the fight to-morrow!"

"Will," said Fred with conviction, "I fear it is a losing game!"

"We must not give up hope!"

"At one time yesterday it looked as if the victory would be ours."

"That is true! If General Johnston had not been wounded that might have happened. We certainly had the field won!"

"So we did! Poor General Smith was also stricken down with a paralytic shock. However, the morrow may see a change. But McClellan has got some of his forces across the Chickahominy. You see he is fighting with fresh men."

"That is true. But it will never do to let him win. We are the only barrier on the road to Richmond."

"The capture of Richmond, however, will benefit the Union but little."

"It would mean humiliation and defeat for the people of Virginia, and that is bad enough. We must avoid that."

The desire was strong upon Will Prentiss to go in quest of his sister, who might ere this be in the hands of the guerrillas.

But great as was this desire and the love for his sister, he was not able to do so. It was his duty to remain at his post and wait for the morrow.

There was little fear of a night attack.

McClellan's army had been well used up, as well as the Confederates. It was just as necessary for them to recoup.

So the two armies lay like sullen dogs opposite each other, resting and waiting for the morrow.

The Grays had lost many of their brave boys. Their ranks were greatly thinned.

But before midnight there arrived from Richmond a band of young recruits. Many of these were friends of the Grays and the ranks were quickly recruited.

All that night Will Prentiss tossed upon his cot bed. He was the victim of great anxiety regarding Nell.

He knew that Maydell had deserted the army and linked his fortune with Smith and his guerrillas.

Henceforth he would be an outlaw. If Nell fell into his hands only the worst could be feared.

The night hours passed, however, and daylight came at last.

With the first break of day the thunder of guns smote upon the air. The attack was resumed by the Union troops.

For several hours a hot fight ensued.

General Meagher's Irish regiments were sent in to oppose the brigade of Mahone and Pryor. They fought valiantly. But at noon the Confederates drew back and the battle of Fair Oaks was over.

McClellan did not attempt to follow up his advantage and advance upon Richmond. It is likely that this was a wise move upon his part.

Exhausted from hard fighting, the two armies lay quietly opposite each other. There was no general conflict.

But there were any number of minor engagements and skirmishes during the next ten days.

In some of these the Virginia Grays figured creditably. When President Davis gave the order for the Confederate line to draw back, Will Prentiss received an order to visit him in his tent.

The boy captain obeyed.

As he faced the great Southern leader the latter held out his hand.

"Prentiss," he said warmly, "I am glad to say that I do not believe you in any degree guilty of that charge against you. It is all the work of that scoundrel Maydell. If I could catch him now I would hang him!"

Will replied with pleasure:

"I am glad that you regard me in a true light, President Davis. Sooner than become a traitor to the Confederacy I would lay down my life!"

"I believe you, boy! I shall never distrust you again. Now you spoke about your sister and that she was in danger from the persecutions of this villain."

"Yes," replied Will. "I fear that she is even now in his hands!"

"What? Have you reason to believe that?"

"I have, sir. I know that a plot was conceived to accomplish that end with the aid of Pete Smith two nights ago. I greatly fear for my sister."

"Where do you think Smith and his guerrillas can be found?"

"I fancy they are hovering about our right beyond White Oak Swamp."

"Oh! That is it, eh?"

President Davis scrutinized a map. He stroked his beard a moment.

Then he turned and said sharply to an orderly:

"Send for Canfield, the scout."

The orderly departed. President Davis turned and said:

"I have just been informed by this man Canfield of the presence of a detached company of Union soldiers in this same White Oak Swamp. They are lying in wait for a chance to spring upon and destroy our supply trains. They are a menace to our safety, and they must be ferreted out. Now I think you can do it."

"I shall send you and your Grays into the swamp after the Union soldiers. I want you to find and capture them. They are in force equal to you. They number more than one hundred men."

"Certainly they have courage," said Will in surprise. "You don't think they are a part of Smith's guerrillas?"

"No, I do not, but I am not sure. That may be your chance. I want you to ferret them out. At the same time you can look for Smith."

"I am glad to accept the commission," cried Will eagerly.

"If you are careful and alert you will win out. Canfield will guide you."

"I will try!"

Just then the scout entered. He was a peculiar type of man.

A straggling beard and bushy hair showed little of his face. He had cunning gray eyes. He was a type of hunter and ranger peculiar to the mountaineers.

"Canfield," said Mr. Davis, "I introduce you to Captain Prentiss."

The scout made an awkward bow.

"I am pleased to meet yer," he said.

"Now, Canfield, I am going to place Captain Prentiss and his Virginia Grays in your hands. I want you to take them to the hiding place of Proctor and his men. I want you to find that Union camp."

The scout nodded.

"All right, sir."

"By the way, do you know Pete Smith, the guerrilla?"

"Yes! I reckon I do!"

"Do you know where he is lurking just now?"

"I reckon I do," replied the scout. "It's over in ther White Oak Swamp. But I wanter tell ye that ye will hev ter send a big force in thar ter git him, fer he is mighty well purtected."

"I suppose that is true," said President Davis. Then he turned to Will.

"Locate the villain if you can and I will send you reinforcements."

"All right, Mr. Davis!" agreed Will. "I will obey your orders."

"I wish you the best of good fortune, my boy. I shall expect to hear from you soon. I hope you will capture Proctor and his men, and if possible get Maydell and Smith."

"I will try," said Will earnestly. "Now, Mr. Canfield, I am with you!"

They saluted, and when once outside Will said:

"Mr. Canfield, I hope you will be able to lead us to the

camp of these Union raiders. I hope we will be able to capture them."

The old hunter nodded in a perfunctory way and replied: "I reckon I can!"

Back to the camp of the Grays Will and the scout went.

The boy captain was in an eager state of mind. He was desirous of starting at once upon his mission.

He told Fred Randolph all. The other officers of the company were called in and all was explained to them.

There was much interest in the matter and all were eager to start upon the new mission. It did not take long to get the company ready.

In a little while the Grays were in light marching order, and the start was at once made.

They marched north and then swung to the west, making a long detour, and finally reaching the swamp at a point southwest of Seven Pines.

Here Canfield made search for an old road which entered the swamp. This road they followed for hours.

Suddenly Canfield came to a halt.

"Wait," he whispered to Will. "Hold yer men here! I'll be back in a moment."

The hunter glided away through the brush. It was not many moments before from a distant point came a sharp hail:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

It was the summons of a picket. It meant that the hunter had struck a picket line. The foe must be near at hand.

Will held his men back. No other sound was heard until suddenly Canfield appeared before them.

There was a grin on his weather-beaten face.

"Come on," he said. "Ther way is clear."

"But," exclaimed Will, "the picket—what of him?"

"There ain't no picket, no more," he said. "He's done fer!"

"What?" exclaimed Will. "You disposed of him?"

"I reckon I did! I give him a crack on ther head that put him to sleep."

Will shrugged his shoulders. In spite of it all, he felt a pang of regret for the picket, for he had served as such himself and he knew what the awful risk was.

But the death of the picket was a matter of foolish sentiment just then.

The success of the project before them was of more importance than anything else just now.

So Will deferred to the guide, who pushed forward among the oaks and the Grays followed him. For some ways they made their way along a beaten path.

Then they came suddenly upon a blaze of fire in the gloom among the trees. The old hunter stepped forward and pointed his finger at it.

"Thar ye be!" he cried.

The scene was a thrilling one. The campfire, with its kettle suspended over blazing coals, could be seen.

A number of figures in Union blue were bending over the fire.

CHAPTER VIII.

FIGHTING IN THE WOODS.

The old scout had certainly hit upon the right trail.

The camp of the Union soldiers had been found. Will Prentiss swung his sword and shouted:

"Forward, Grays! Charge bayonets!"

At once the Grays, with a ringing cheer, sprung forward. In the darkness they descended upon the Union camp.

It was like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky.

For a moment there was panic and confusion in the camp. Shots were fired, hand to hand conflicts followed and there was a mad scramble.

But the Grays swept about the Union camp in a wide circle, completely surrounding the foe.

The result was quickly reached. The Union soldiers, finding themselves entrapped and not knowing the number of the foe, threw down their arms.

In a few moments Will was receiving the sword of Captain Proctor. It was a quick and thrilling victory.

With wild cheers, the Grays made the welkin ring. The Union camp and all its supplies was theirs.

At once they took possession. To Will's surprise he found that Proctor's men had a couple of field pieces. They were well equipped and had been lying in wait for a chance to attack the supply trains.

They had failed in this.

The daring work of the Grays had blocked them and had resulted in the saving of a disastrous blow to their army. Will placed guards about his prisoners and proceeded to bivouac in the camp of his foes.

In a little while the Grays were busy over the same camp-fires and even using the supplies of the captured foe.

Will had been so absorbed in this work of occupying the captured camp that he quite forgot Canfield. When he came to look for the old hunter he was gone.

Inquiry failed to learn his whereabouts or the cause of his disappearance.

Fred Randolph sent scouts everywhere, but they could get no trace of him.

"Queer what has become of Canfield," said Will to his young lieutenant.

"I think so," agreed Fred. "He disappeared when the fight began."

"Can he have been killed?"

"I don't believe it! He did not take part in the fight."

"You think not?"

"I know he did not."

Will was puzzled.

"I don't see why he should have gone," he said. "I thought he would remain with us while we tried to locate Smith."

It was certain, though, that Canfield had vanished. Search for him was of no avail.

However, Will had no idea of changing his plans.

He proposed on the morrow to march for Longstreet's

camp and turn the prisoners over to him. Then the Grays would begin their quest for Smith.

The night passed without further incident. In the morning Will was astir early and the Grays were soon making ready for their long march.

The prisoners of war were formed in line. Captain Proctor marched beside Will and Fred.

In this way they took up the return march through the White Oak Swamp. It was easy enough to retrace their trail.

For a mile they pushed on without incident. Will had sent scouts ahead and was on the alert.

For he knew that there was always a chance to become involved in a fight with some roving band of guerrillas or even a detachment of the Union troops.

It was not an easy task marching through the bottom lands.

The ground was miry and boggy and at times the men would sink to their waists in the ooze.

But they kept on until suddenly one of the vanguard but a few yards from Will gave a groan, flung up his arms and fell.

A bullet had penetrated his brain. The next moment Will felt a sting in his cheek. Blood dropped from the course of the bullet, which had grazed his skin.

The air became full of bullets. Several of the boys went down.

Will gave quick sharp orders to his men to deploy in line of battle. He was not a moment too soon.

From the woods came a storm of bullets. The enemy could not be seen, but the boy captain could locate them quite well.

A slight ridge of land just ahead made an admirable breastwork for the foe.

Will could not as yet determine whether the attacking party was Union or guerrillas. He fancied that it was the latter.

Quickly as possible the Grays opened fire. They sent volleys into the woods and began a steady advance.

The firing became steady now. The Grays had drawn quite near to the ridge.

"They seem to be in great strength, Will," said Fred as he came up.

"Yes."

"Do you think it would be safe to make a bayonet charge?"

"That is what is coming," said Will, "but it is not time. We will wait a few moments."

"Do you think they are Union troops?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We can see nothing of regimental colors. See! What did I tell you?"

Over the breastwork formed by the ridge of land a line of men suddenly surged. They came down with a rush.

It was a matter of deep astonishment to Will.

But he saw their purpose in an instant. They were

going to make a charge upon the Grays, the very course Will had decided upon.

It was seen that they were not regular troops, which was all the more surprising, for irregular warfare was the rule of the guerrilla.

But Will gave a start as he recognized a figure in their lead.

It was Maydell.

He was swinging his sword and exhorting the line of armed men. On they came with a rush.

Will ordered his men to draw their line in until a solid formation was almost in order.

He was better satisfied to maintain the defensive than the offensive. He had only to repulse them.

Of course, failing in this, there would be serious consequences. But this Will did not anticipate.

So he gave the word:

"Hold steady, boys! Wait for them! Now give them a volley! Fire!"

"Fire!"

The order ran along the line. A sheet of flame leaped forth and the guerrilla line was shattered. They wavered, partly reformed and halted.

Maydell was fiercely urging them on. It was a critical moment.

Will was not slow to see and embrace the situation.

A quick sharp order escaped his lips:

"Fix bayonets!"

In an instant this was done. The Grays gave a wild cheer. Then came the order:

"Forward, Grays! Charge!"

Out leaped the gray line. It crossed the intervening distance like a thunderbolt. The Grays struck the enemy's line with terrific impact.

For a moment there was fierce hand-to-hand fighting. Maydell was seen to be fleeing in cowardly fashion.

Will Prentiss shouted loudly:

"Catch him! Overtake that fellow at any cost!"

But Maydell sprung upon a horse and dashed madly away. The guerrillas, such as were surrounded, threw down their arms and surrendered. It was an exciting moment, and the Grays were in jubilant spirits, for this was the second victory of the past twenty-four hours.

The guerrillas, to the number of a score, were made prisoners.

They were marched back to join the other prisoners. Once again the Grays prepared to continue their march.

The remaining guerrillas had evidently put a good distance between them and the spot. They were not to be seen.

The Grays had lost half a dozen of their boys. These were left unburied, as Will realized that it was extremely perilous to remain longer in the vicinity.

Fred came up eagerly.

"Well, Will, we gave them a beating."

"Thus far we are ahead."

"Did you see Maydell?"

"Yes."

"I tried hard to catch him."

"He is slippery."

"I should say so. I saw nothing of Smith, though."

"Nor I. Do you know I fancy this attack was wholly the work of Maydell. I don't believe Smith would have authorized it."

"Just my idea."

"I only wish we could get hold of Smith. But perhaps our chance will come. If we only had these prisoners off our hands——"

"We must drop them!"

"No, that would hardly do. It would be disobedience of orders. President Davis sent us out to capture them. We must return with them."

Once again the Grays got under way. They again floundered on over the corduroy roads of the swamp.

They were not attacked again. In due time they came out of the swamp and the Confederate pickets were encountered.

It was with a sense of triumph and pleasure that Will turned the prisoners over to Longstreet's guard.

Then he turned his company about and started to retrace his steps to the swamp. But he did not proceed at random.

For one of the prisoners had volunteered to give him full and accurate description of the hiding place of Pete Smith.

The fellow, who gave his name as Joe Brace, said:

"I kin give ye ther hull story. I'm an honest man, but I was pressed into ther company by order of Pete Smith. I hate him wuss nor pizen, an' I'll set ye onto him if ye want me to."

Will talked with the fellow guardedly and found that he did really know the den of the guerrilla chief.

It was easy for him to make a trade with this man Brace.

By promising him immunity from capture or punishment he secured from him a full confession.

"You bet we'd never hev tackled ye if Pete Smith had been on hand. He came up too late," said Brace. "It's all ther work of that conceited dude Maydell. I hope if ye capture him ye'll hang him."

"That will be his fate," said Will. "But I don't want to pull the halter."

"I'll pull it," said Brace with a grin which caused Will to shrug his shoulders. He did not like the fellow.

But he asked again:

"You know the place where Smith and Maydell hang out, do you?"

"I do," replied Brace, and his manner had all the appearance of utter truthfulness.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SWAMP ISLAND.

"Where is it?"

"I can't tell you, but I can take you to it."

Will nodded slowly.

"That will do," he said. "Now tell me one thing more!"

"What?"

"Do you know if Pete Smith or Maydell have in captivity a young woman?"

Brace looked furtively at Will. He seemed to weigh the question cautiously. Then he made reply:

"I think they have!"

The two young officers gave a great start. Will's face paled a little.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Will you describe her to us?"

Brace knit his brows.

"She is of meejum height," he said slowly. "She has light hair and is pooty. I reckon she has been a spy."

"It's Nell!" said Will conclusively. "There is no doubt of that. Look here, Brace, I want the truth!"

"I'm givin' it to ye," said the fellow sullenly. "What more do ye want?"

"Much!" said Fred laconically. "Tell us now where she is!"

"Where?" exclaimed Brace with a sudden cunning gleam in his eyes. "Oh, I see! It's a case of bein' in love, eh? Wall, she's a pooty gal an'——"

"Shut up, you scoundrel!" cried Will angrily. "Don't throw out insinuations. We want straightforward answers."

"Ain't ye gittin' 'em?"

"No!"

"Wall, it's ther best I kin do!"

"No, it's not. We want to know where this young woman is kept in captivity. You must tell us!"

Brace was sullen.

"I'll tell ye nuthin'," he said. "Go on about yer bizness an' leave me alone!"

"Hardly!" said Will quietly. "You'll tell us the truth or I'll make it mighty unpleasant for you!"

"Do yer wust!"

"All right," said Will grimly. "Now, Fred, signal the Grays."

"Oh!" sneered Brace scornfully. "Yer gettin' mad, are ye? I gave ye credit for more sense. Ye'll gain nuthin' from me!"

"Then you'll remain a prisoner forever. You cannot escape from this place without you show a clean record," said Will.

"I kin do that!"

"Well, we may require you to do so. But, let me see. You had just come from the battlefield of Fair Oaks. Thousands of men have disappeared from that battle. This swamp is full of them. If you were hung to yonder tree, as you deserve, you would not be missed. I say, there, Sergeant Spotswood, bring me a rope!"

"All right, captain."

The sergeant stepped out of the ranks and in a few moments produced a rope. Will caused it to be thrown over the limb of a tree.

Brace began to chatter in terror. He threw up his hands.

"I cave!" he cried. "I'll tell ye everything. I'm makin' a clean breast!"

"Very good," said Will. "Let's have it."

"The gal is down to old Mammy Hanks' cabin, on ther

creek. It's five miles from here. You bet it's a hard place to git to an' Smith has it all surrounded."

Will read the truth in the fellow's face.

"You've saved your life, Brace," he said. "Now tell us how to get there."

"I kin take ye to ther creek an' ye kin foller it down."

"Good! Let us lose no time. Just lead the way at once."

Brace fell in at once in advance of the Grays. Through the swamp they went for a long distance.

Suddenly the glimmer of the waters of the creek were seen. A few moments later they were on its banks.

Brace then explained that the creek for a distance of five miles pursued its course evenly. It then enlarged into what was a small lagoon.

In the centre of this was a small island. On this island the guerrillas had their camp.

The island's stronghold was quite well fortified. There were intrenchments and a couple of field pieces.

To attack it would be exceedingly difficult and dangerous, even for an army. So miry was the ground about the lagoon that it was necessary to use extreme caution in approaching it.

The island was reached by flat boats or a small causeway with a drawbridge. This was defended by the cannon.

It was certainly an ideal place for such a gang of outlaws as Pete Smith's men. Mammy Hanks' cabin was on this island.

The old colored woman had lived there for years. She had been given her freedom by an indulgent mistress and her cabin had been the hiding place and retreat of many a fugitive slave.

It was in her charge that Nell had been placed by her captors. Brace now described the whole affair.

He depicted the scene of abduction from the farm house near Old Tavern. Nell had made all resistance possible, but she was carried away by the guerrillas.

Will's blood tingled as he listened to the story.

His feelings toward Maydell were bitter enough, and could he have met the villain at that moment there would have been a serious encounter.

When the Grays reached the lagoon they were met with the shots of a picket and knew that their presence was discovered.

The causeway leading to the island was seen, and the drawbridge was now seen to be lifted.

Armed men appeared on the other side and the cannon spoke, sending shells far over into the woods.

These burst near the position of the Grays, and for a time greatly endangered them. But Will did not intend to remain inactive for long.

The situation was closely studied and the Grays deployed so as to make a line of battle in case of attack.

This, however, was not made.

The guerrillas seemed well satisfied to remain where they were and await developments, which were not slow in coming.

Will now would have given much for a piece of artillery with which to answer the fire of the guerrillas' guns.

These commanded the causeway completely and precluded anything like a safe attack. Yet Will considered the feasibility of a charge across it.

It was an odd sensation to him that his sister Nell was a prisoner on that little island in the lagoon. He certainly would never abandon the effort to effect her rescue.

But, just when Will had made up his mind to order an attack by way of the causeway, he was given a start.

Up a narrow path from the water came a squat figure.

Will restrained an ejaculation as he recognized that figure. It was Canfield, the scout. Fred at this moment came up hastily:

"I say, Will, can't we take that causeway with a quick charge?"

"I believe so," replied Will in the affirmative. "And we will try it. But see—do you know him?"

Will pointed to the hunter.

"It is Canfield!"

It was but a moment's work for the scout to come up and make an awkward salute. Will regarded him severely.

"How is this?" he exclaimed. "Where have you been, my friend? We lost sight of you rather suddenly and somewhat strangely."

"I reckon ye did," replied Canfield.

"Where have you been?"

"Busy!"

"Ah, in what respect?"

"Wall," said the scout as he ejected a chew of tobacco, "thet's easy enough to answer. I've been tryin' to locate that pooty gal you say was in ther hands of Smith and Maydell."

Will gave a sharp exclamation of interest.

"And you have had success?" he asked.

"Yas!"

In an instant Will was face to face with Canfield. He was very earnest.

"No trifling!" he said sternly. "Is my sister a prisoner on that island?"

The scout chuckled and pulled a moment at his beard. He looked at Will and winked drolly.

"No," he replied. "She ain't!"

"Do you know where she is?"

"Yas!"

"Ah, don't keep me in further suspense. I want to know where she is!"

"Wall," said Canfield slowly, "I'm pleased to tell ye that she's safe."

"But, where—where?"

"Give me time, young feller," said the scout coolly. "Ye will remember that I skipped out after ther fight with Proctor's men."

"Yes!"

"Wall, I knowed ye had 'em cornered all right an' that was all I keered about. I reckoned I could do more toward findin' that gal alone than with a hull regiment with me. D'ye see?"

"Go on!"

"So I jest skipped out an' found my way down into this

place. I laid low and watched until I got ther lay of ther land. Then I swam that lagoon an' got onto ther island.

"I got inter Mammy Hanks' cabin an' I found yer sister safe. I got her out all right and right under ther noses of ther guards we swam the lagoon. She's at this minit a mile below hyar with the family of Tim Hyers, a friend of mine, an' safe fer a time, till they find her. Thet's what I've been doin'."

The scout paused and Will seized his hand.

"You have done finely, Canfield," he cried. "That is beyond my wildest expectations. I owe you a life-long debt."

"Wall, I did ther best I could," replied the scout modestly. "But what do ye propose to do now?"

"Do you think Nell is quite safe for a time at least?"

"Yas, I think so. Tim is right onto ther game, an' he won't take no chances. I think she's safe."

"Good! I think then that I'll linger here and try to wipe out this gang of vipers."

"I glory in yer spunk, lad! Jest pitch in an' eat 'em up. Ye kin certainly do it."

Will imparted this plan to Fred, who was enthusiastic. But he said:

"We've got a good job on hand, Will. They are well fortified and will give us a hard fight."

"All right," agreed the boy captain. "We must expect that. But we'll certainly whip them out. I want to take both Maydell and Smith back to Old Tavern as prisoners."

"I hope we may!"

Will now drew his men back a little and set in to do some reconnoitering. He saw at once that the task before him was one of tremendous magnitude.

The guerrillas could seemingly only be approached by means of the causeway. The cannon defended this.

But it did not take Will Prentiss long to decide upon another method of reaching the citadel of the foe.

He had no doubt but that the two guerrilla leaders were on the island with all their followers. It was up to him to get them.

CHAPTER X.

THE SURRENDER.

Will Prentiss abandoned the daring plan of a charge across the causeway. He saw that it would mean a tremendous sacrifice of life.

This he could not afford. His plan for driving the guerrillas from the island was a unique one.

Below the lagoon, not a hundred yards from its lower outlet, the creek was not over one hundred feet wide. The bottom was hard and sandy.

Nearby was a growth of hickory and willow. Will carefully considered his plan and finally said:

"I believe I have hit upon it!"

"What?" exclaimed Fred eagerly.

"I think that we have the bird in the hand, and all that is left is to make sure of it."

"How is that?"

"Do you note the position of the outlet and that all the water in the lagoon must escape by this narrow channel?"

"Yes."

"You will also observe that the surface of the island is low. A dam across this outlet would flood the island. It will force its occupants to flee or be drowned like rats in a trap. What will Smith and his men do? They will get out!"

"And then——"

"And then we will lie in wait for them and add a peerless victory to the already long chain for the Confederate arms."

Fred was startled.

"Capital!" he exclaimed. "On my word, Will, you are a wonder. That is a great deed of engineering skill."

Will laughed and rejoined:

"It is a singular way of forcing the foe to surrender. I am sure they will do so."

"When was this plan first suggested to you?"

"It was never suggested to me. I conceived it myself."

"Well, really, Will, it is a matter of wonder if we succeed. But my men are ready. What do you require?"

"Every man skilled in building structures in the water. You need say nothing more. I mean to put a dam three feet high across the outlet."

"Bravo!" cried Fred. "I already feel better about the project. If we can force them to leave the island there is little doubt but that they will surrender."

"I think so!"

The best men in the company responded to the call. At once work began.

All realized the need of haste. If Union troops should happen on the scene as a means of reinforcement the game would be up. But Will did not anticipate this.

He knew that the guerrilla Smith was in equal disfavor with the Union leaders. He had, with Maydell, fallen to the level of bushwhackers.

Tools were not plentiful with which to make the dam.

But axes were procured, as well as shovels, by sending out of the swamp to a nearby plantation.

Then work was begun.

Trees were felled and placed across the stream. Brush was interwoven with these and earth filled in between.

No attempt was made to make the dam stationary. All that was desired was a temporary structure that would cause the water to back up.

And this in a few hours' time was constructed. The guerrillas on the island could not help but see what was going on.

They trained the guns upon the dam and opened fire, which for a time seemed bound to defeat the project.

But Will posted his best marksmen so that they picked off the gunners so fast that the guerrillas were compelled to withdraw out of range.

Work on the dam progressed. Soon it began to hold and the waters of the creek began to rise.

In an hour's time they were beginning to creep over the island.

The position of the guerrillas was now an awkward one. Consternation took the place of the confidence they had felt.

They had never dreamed of such a simple possibility as being flooded out of their retreat.

Instead of requiring that the enemy attack them, they were now compelled to assume the aggressive. It was a case of get out or die.

Will and his Grays felt a thrill of exultation.

It looked as if they had really got the foe in a trap from which there was no chance for escape. Surrender or annihilation seemed their only hope.

They could be seen hurrying about in great confusion.

The water grew rapidly so high that it was of little use for them to try and use the guns. Will's sharpshooters kept the gunners out of range.

"We've got them, Will," cried Fred with exultation. "They have got to surrender."

"Either that or come out and fight."

"They kain't very well do that," declared Canfield. "If they git out on the causeway you kin mow 'em down like sheep."

This was true. But Will said:

"I do not seek to slaughter them. If they will surrender they shall be treated as prisoners of war."

The scout looked surprised.

"But they ain't nuthin' more nor less than bushwhackers an' oughter be hung," he said.

"That's all right," said the young captain. "They are entitled to a trial, and the government will accord them that."

The old scout looked at Will curiously and whistled softly. Evidently his ideas of the sort of punishment bushwhackers deserve did not quite jibe with Will's.

But now a movement on the island attracted the attention of all. It was seen that a boat was putting out.

In the bow was a flag of truce. The boat rapidly crossed the lagoon.

"Go down and see what they want, Fred," said Will quietly. In the bow he recognized Smith, the guerrilla.

Fred went down to the shore to meet the boat. Smith sprung out and greeted him excitedly.

"Where is your captain?" he asked.

"He is busy at present," replied Fred.

"I want to see him."

"He has sent me to receive you."

"I don't want to do business with you. I want to see him," cried Smith angrily. "I am captain of this company and I demand courtesy and fair treatment."

"You will get it so far as you deserve," said Fred. "If you have any business to state, I advise you to hurry."

The guerrilla saw that his bluff would not work, so he said:

"You've got us in a bad hole. What are your best terms?"

"Unconditional surrender!"

A fierce exclamation escaped Smith.

"Oh, say! Do you think I am a fool? Talk reason! What terms will you give us?"

"I have stated them."

"You have no authority to make terms. I want to see your captain."

"You will make terms with me if you wish," said Fred. "I advise you to hasten, for the water is rising."

"Confound you," growled Smith. "We demand to be allowed to march out with our arms and the honors of war. Our fortress then becomes yours."

Smith's proposition caused Fred to smile.

"Are you serious, sir?" he asked.

"I am!"

"Then disabuse your mind at once of any idea that you will be able to escape so easily. You will surrender unconditionally at once or we shall open fire upon you."

Fred turned to walk away. Smith put up his hand.

"Hold on!" he said in a wheedling tone. "Come down to reason. We'll march out and leave our arms."

"We don't want your arms. We want you," replied Fred.

The guerrilla's face was ghastly in its hue.

"I see! You want to hang me," he said. "I might as well die fighting."

"You will be assured a fair trial," said Fred. "If you can prove your innocence of illegal warfare you will be given the rights of a prisoner of war."

"Will you assure us now the rights of prisoners of war?"

"No!"

Smith shook his fist fiercely at Fred. He was very angry.

"Confound you for a stubborn blockhead!" he hissed. "You have no right to treat with me anyway. I demand to see your captain!"

Fred smiled coldly.

"Captain Prentiss has directed me in every way," he said. "I am acting strictly by his orders."

"You are an ass!"

Fred turned to walk away. Smith rained vituperative remarks upon him. He sprung into his boat and was rowed away across the lagoon.

He feared to accept the terms demanded by Will. He knew that it would be as well to die in the flood as on the gallows.

But when well out into the current he shouted:

"Tell your milk-sop of a captain that the girl he is looking for shall be shot if he does not modify his terms."

Fred did not reply. But these words were heard by Will. For a moment the boy captain felt a chill.

But he heard a chuckle and saw Canfield stroking his beard.

"Thet is a clean bluff," said the hunter. "He knows that the gal is not there!"

Will now turned and gave orders that the Grays should cover the causeway with their muskets.

"If they attempt to cross it shoot them down," he commanded. "We must not let these rats escape!"

The situation on the island was growing desperate. The water was now entirely over it to the depth of some inches.

The guerrillas could be seen massing by the causeway. It was plain that they intended to make a desperate break for escape.

Will kept his men steady and waited. Then suddenly, with a mad yell, the guerrillas started on their charge across the causeway.

It was much against Will's plan to fire upon them. But he knew that if they reached the mainland there would be great danger, for they greatly outnumbered his men.

So the word to open fire was given.

The guerrillas had already opened fire as they came on. But the Grays sent sweeping volleys into their ranks.

They were staggered, and in vain they tried to rally. The causeway was an exposed place, and they were easy marks for the muskets of the Confederate boys.

For a time it was a hot fight.

Then the guerrillas broke and fled back to the island. They climbed into trees and some even swam into the lagoon. The critical moment had arrived.

Then once more the white flag was seen. A voice came across the lagoon.

"We surrender!"

At once Will gave orders to cease firing. Such of the guerrillas as were on the island were allowed to cross the causeway and were disarmed as they came off.

Will stood a witness to all as the captured men filed by. It was the greatest victory yet for the Boys in Gray. Truly they were winning out in great shape.

CHAPTER XI.

A DARK TRAGEDY.

Many of the guerrillas had leaped into the lagoon and had swam ashore. They landed at points not patrolled by the Grays and consequently were able to escape.

As the prisoners filed by him Will looked for Maydell and Smith.

To his utter chagrin and surprise neither one of the villains appeared. When the last man had given up his arms they were yet missing.

Will was astounded as well as deeply disappointed. He gave orders to encircle the lagoon and search for them, for he felt sure that they had escaped by swimming.

But this did not result in finding a trace of them.

Both had escaped.

This was a most disappointing fact. Will was deeply chagrined. But just then Canfield, the scout, came to the fore.

The old woodsman seemed to be deeply disturbed. He said:

"I don't want ter give no wrong impression, gents, but I must tell ye thet those two villains mean no good to nobody, an' I reckon they've struck out fer Tim Hyers' place. As near as I kin make out they got out of ther water over yender by that blasted tree an' they will be right on ther trail to Tim's house."

Will turned pale. The force of this assumption struck him.

"That is just what they will do," he cried. "We must go thither at once."

"I dunno jest how much of a stand Tim kin make," said Canfield. "He has two boys an' ther old woman, an' all of 'em is dead shots. They'll give ther villains a tough fight."

"There is reason to believe that a number of their men escaped with them, I suppose," said Fred.

"Yes," replied Canfield. "I think I saw 'em when they made their landing over yender. But they were too far away to reach."

The question was now a serious one. With all the prisoners they had captured, more than two hundred in number, the Grays were in a bad position.

They could not afford to take chances in leaving them with a small guard.

On the other hand, now that the nest of guerrillas had been captured, it would never do to let them escape.

Will Prentiss pondered the matter for some moments. He finally reached a decision.

He called Fred Randolph to him and said:

"Fred, I want you to take the prisoners into camp and turn them over to General Longstreet. I shall detail Spotswood and Champneys to go with me. I am going with Canfield down to Hyers' place to rescue Nell."

Fred bowed and replied:

"I will execute your orders, Will. What shall I do then?"

Will was thoughtful.

"After disposing of the prisoners," he said finally, "march down this way. I may be able to rejoin you, or you may be able to find me."

"I will do it," cried Fred with alacrity. "You may depend upon it."

So Will detached Spotswood and Champneys from his company as his companions. They were plucky fellows and he knew he could depend upon them.

The Grays marched away, and Will and his companions, guided by Canfield, set out for Hyers' plantation.

They skirted the lagoon and came into a woods trail. On they pressed rapidly, Canfield leading the way.

It seemed to Will as if the distance was interminable. His anxiety was very great.

Canfield, quiet, alert and shrewd as a fox, plunged along through the undergrowth. The others followed as well as they could.

For a long time they kept on.

White Oak Swamp was left far behind, and they came into the open country. Wide fields and rail fences became the order.

They struck into a green carpeted lane first. It was now late in the afternoon.

Suddenly Canfield came to a halt with a gasp, and his weather-beaten face grew livid.

He clutched at his throat a moment and his eyes rolled. At first Will thought he might have a fit and sprung to his side.

But the hunter, with a huge shrug and a groan, straightened up and gasped:

"Look yender! Ther wust has happened."

Will and his companions looked in the direction indicated. The boy captain's face grew white.

A white pall of smoke rose above a distant smouldering heap of ruins. On that spot had once stood a thrifty plantation house.

It was now in ashes.

"Thet was Tim Hyers' house," said the scout. "I kin see thet villainy has been at work hyar. Smith an' Maydell got here afore us."

"My soul!" exclaimed Will with white lips. "We are too late!"

"Too late!"

For a time they hesitated before going further. The scene they must meet had already been pictured to them.

But presently they went forward.

Tim Hyers' home was no more. As they crossed the stile and approached the house Will came upon the body of a colored slave.

A bullet wound in the skull told the tale of murder. In his hand was a club showing that he had died in defence of his master's home.

A little further on two more of the black defenders were found. The ground was torn and trampled, showing a desperate struggle.

But when the heap of ruins was reached the further evidences of the tragedy were discovered. At the base of a tall oak lay the body of Ben Hyers, the planter's son.

His long-barreled rifle was gripped in his hands yet, showing that he had died fighting for his home.

An old negress lay near with a gaping shot wound in her body. But the scout, with a great cry of agony, sprung forward and knelt down over the body of the planter himself.

Tim Hyers had died like a hero in defense of his home.

His body was filled with bullet holes. The scout for a time gave way to his great grief.

Then he arose and raised his head as if taking an oath.

"I'll swar to have revenge fer this," he said tensely. "Not till these ornery sarpints hev got their reward will I rest or sleep. Thet's me, Jim Canfield!"

Will and his two companions, however, had been looking among the ruins and now came upon a startling discovery.

A large board had been planted in the ground.

On it was written in letters of blood:

"Take Notice: The game is mine! I win and she is mine forever. You know what that means. B. M."

Will's heart sank. In that moment he had no doubt that Nell was really in the hands of the scoundrel Maydell. His heart grew hard and bitter, for he loved his sister dearly.

No living thing had been left on the Hyers plantation. Not a building was standing.

Silently Will Prentiss turned to Canfield, the scout. Each seemed to know what was in the other's mind.

They went about looking for signs of the murderers. There was every evidence that Maydell and Smith had been accompanied by several of the guerrillas.

A trail was found leading to the south. At once they started to follow it.

Canfield was silent and grim. He followed the trail down like a sleuth hound. It led for a time down the lane until finally the lane merged with the highway.

Here it was easily discernible in the sandy soil that they were making toward Seven Pines. As the pursuers kept on it began to rapidly merge into dusk.

But suddenly, as they reached a point where the road wended its way around a wooded cliff, the sounds of hoof-beats fell upon their ears.

They had just time to spring into the bushes by the road side. Joe Champneys gave a startled cry:

"It's Union cavalry!"

This was seen to be true. Into view rode a squad of blue riders. Our friends had been none too soon.

Had they been seen by the cavalry leader their capture

would have been certain. To be captured just now was far from Will's desire or purpose.

The four trailers hid in the underbrush and watched the cavalry. For a moment they swung into view around a bend in the road.

Then a startling thing happened.

There was a distant report, a puff of smoke and one of the riders dropped from his saddle.

At once the Union captain gave a sharp order and the detachment came to a halt.

Carbines were leveled and a volley sent in the direction of the distant shot. But shots now came thick and fast and bullets whistled through the cavalry ranks.

"There's trouble out there!" cried Spotswood. "Some of our boys are in line there!"

"Who can they be?" asked Champneys.

"That's the question!"

Will Prentiss was at once interested. He said explanatively:

"It can't be any regular body of our troops. Longstreet's line does not extend in this direction."

"Do you suppose it's Smith and his men?"

"They are in greater force!"

"Ah, look there!"

A Confederate flag was seen waving through the distant timber. At once Will guessed the truth.

"It is one of our outposts," he declared. "I can see the point. There will be a hot skirmish here in a few moments."

"That's right," agreed Joe. "That's the whole game!"

Canfield all this while had been quiet. Now he clutched Will's arm.

"See!" he whispered. "The Yankees are going to give battle!"

This was true. The captain of cavalry dismounted his men and had advanced to the rail fence. He deployed his men in quick and excellent order.

They crossed the fence and began to creep nearer the outpost. A guard of three men had been left with the horses.

Will and his companions watched the affair with interest. The natural impulse to take part in the affair was upon them.

But the project of overtaking Maydell and his gang was paramount.

They knew that the guerrillas could not have stuck to the highway, for they would have met the Union cavalry. It was very likely that they would have been halted.

"What shall we do?" asked Champneys. "I feel like getting into that fight myself."

"We must go on," said Will, shaking his head. "It is very necessary to overtake the guerrillas."

"We kin deal 'em one hard blow on ther way," said Canfield.

"How is that?"

"We can stampede the Union horses. That will help our boys very much."

"So it will," cried Spotswood. "That is a big scheme!"

The idea impressed Will favorably. It was even suggestive of another plan.

"We might borrow a few of their horses," he cried. "We could get on faster."

"Capital!" cried Spotswood. "Their guard is weak. What do you say, Canfield?"

The scout's eyes glittered.

"Nothin' could be better," he declared. "Let us waste no time!"

At once the plan was put into execution. The quartette crept up near the guard and suddenly burst upon them from the bushes. A few shots put them to flight.

Quick as a flash the horses were freed and then stampeded. Each of the party had secured a horse fully saddled and equipped.

They sprung into saddle at once.

There was no time to lose.

The Union captain had seen the move and was ordering his men back. The cheers of those in the outpost could be heard. It was an unexpected turn in their favor.

The Union troops fell back in dismay and confusion.

This rear attack had been so sudden and unexpected that they were fearful of utter defeat. They did not for a moment suspect that the damage had been done by so small a party as four.

But they saw Will and his companions dashing away at full speed, and a full realization came to them.

Just how the affray terminated Will and his men never knew.

They kept on at full speed down the road for some distance. When they drew rein it was at a small fordway of a creek.

Here they dismounted a moment and examined the roadway.

There were footprints of men, but it could not be determined whether they were of Smith and his party or not.

At this point Joe Spotswood in examining the ground picked up an object of interest.

It was a cameo pin such as a lady might wear at her throat. Will studied it carefully; but could not make up his mind whether it belonged to Nell or not.

They crossed the ford and once more rode on down the road.

But it was now rapidly growing dark. Will was not disposed to abandon the chase on this account.

But on the other hand it was not easy to tell where they were going nor could the trail be found. Will was thus in a quandary when suddenly a sight burst upon the gaze of all which caused a great cry to go up.

Far in the dim light of the evening there could be seen the forms of horses and men.

The blaze of fires and the boom of a cannon smote upon the air. The rattle of musketry and distant shouts bespoke a conflict.

"Hello!" cried Joe Spotswood. "What's up over there?"

"There's something going on," cried Champneys. "I think we had better look the matter up."

Boom! Boom! The roar of the cannon now began to fill the air. Will Prentiss was for a moment undecided what to do when suddenly a horseman came into the roadway and confronted them.

In the dim light it was impossible to tell whether he wore a blue uniform or a gray, whether he was a friend or a foe.

But Will Prentiss was determined to find out at once.

Drawing a pistol, he cried:

"Halt! Stand where you are!"

The horseman turned quickly to ride away when Will fired. The bullet struck the horse and he went down.

The rider went over his head.

In an instant Will leaped from his horse and stood over him. In the dim light the fellow scrambled to his feet.

One glance was enough.

A great exclamation escaped his lips as Will thrust a pistol into his face.

"Pete Smith! We have you at last!"

It was indeed the guerrilla chief. He stood a moment paralyzed with fear. Then in a chattering tone he exclaimed:

"Captain Prentiss!"

"That is who it is," cried Will. "You are run to earth at last, Pete Smith."

A cry like that of an animal escaped Canfield, the scout, as he leaped forward and his hands clenched the throat of the outlaw.

"Ye inhuman beast!" he hissed. "I've got ye at last, an' I'll avenge poor Tim Hyers at any cost!"

"Pull him off!" screamed Smith in terror. "Give me a show! I'm not guilty!"

Will threw his arms around Canfield and pulled him back. He spoke words of adjuration almost imploringly.

"Don't be foolish, Canfield! Hyers shall be avenged. I

promise you that. Let him have a trial. I want to learn where Maydell is and I can learn only from him."

Canfield relaxed his hold and drew back without a word. He breathed heavily.

Will faced Smith now and said:

"Denial is of no use, Smith. We know that you killed Hyers and his family."

"I—I didn't do it!" whimpered the fellow. "It was Maydell's work."

"You were hand in glove with Maydell."

"Oh, no, no! I didn't do it!"

"Steady! I want nothing but the truth from you. Answer me at once. Where is Maydell?"

The fellow whimpered:

"I—I don't know!"

"Don't you lie! You know where he is and where he has taken my sister Nell."

The guerrilla chief gave a start.

"Would ye know about yer sister?" he asked. "Is that what ye'd know? Tell me, is it so?"

"Yes," replied Will.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH IS THE END.

Will Prentiss listened with a sort of chill to the next words of the guerrilla chief. He feared that it might be bad news.

Smith had spoken eagerly. He seemed to read Will's mind as he said:

"Ye needn't fear, my lad. She's all right and safe as can be."

"What?" cried Will almost fiercely. "Don't trifle with me, Smith. My sister is very dear to me. Tell me all about her?"

"Wall, on one condition I will. If ye'll give me freedom I'll tell ye where she is and how to go to her."

"Tell me or I'll see you hung."

Smith hesitated a moment.

"Will ye agree that I shall not hang?"

"Yes," replied Will.

"Wall, I'll tell ye. The game is about up. When Maydell raided the Hyers plantation he expected to get the girl spy. But she was not there!"

A great cry escaped Will's lips. It seemed to him as if a mighty load had been lifted from his soul.

"Not there?"

"No!" replied the guerrilla chief. "She made her escape an' she's a good ways from here now. I reckon she's gone back to Richmond. Leastwise Maydell can't find her."

"Thank heaven!" said Will fervently. "She is not in Maydell's hands. For this I am truly thankful. Oh, this makes me happy!"

He felt at the moment as if the world had suddenly grown brighter. All his fears now vanished.

So Nell had been forewarned and had made her escape.

He knew she was astute and that she would be hard to entrap. But he never dreamed that she had eluded capture by the schemer Maydell.

It completely changed his plans. He had every reason to believe that Smith was telling the truth.

"Well, Smith," he said, "where is my sister now? Do you know?"

"Yes," replied the guerrilla. "She is with Longstreet's staff, I think. At least that was the story that Hyers told. I want to assure you that I had nothing whatever to do with that affair at Hyers'. It was Maydell's own work. Of course I didn't interfere. But he had it in for Hyers and he wiped him out. That's all there was to it."

"What is the fight going on over there?" asked Will.

"It is a detachment of Longstreet's corps and they have been attacked by three Union regiments. I reckon both have artillery, an' they'll have a hot fight before they get through."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Will, his blood kindling. "I wish the Grays were here."

"Wall, you bet that Benton's men will need help afore they get through, for they are outnumbered."

Will turned to his companions. Canfield was still sullen and kept a keen eye upon Smith.

The guerrilla chief had been bound and was placed upon a horse. He would not tell where Maydell was to be found.

The fight was waxing hotter over on the ridge.

Will turned to Canfield and said:

"I think we had better join forces with those fellows over there. They are a part of Longstreet's corps. We will turn Smith over to a guard and have him sent to headquarters."

Canfield nodded and said:

"That is all right!"

So the party, with Smith a prisoner in their midst, started to gallop to the scene of the conflict. The famous guerrilla was captured at last and his band broken up forever.

In a few moments they were among the rear guard of Benton's regiment. The battle was waxing hot.

The Union regiments, aided by their artillery, were trying to carry the ridge. Will found Colonel Benton writing

a dispatch to Longstreet upon the carriage of an overturned cannon.

"Hello, Prentiss," he cried eagerly. "I am glad to see you. You have come just in the nick of time. Has Longstreet sent you to reinforce us?"

"No," replied Will. "I have only a couple of companions with me. I wish I had the Grays here. Are you hard pressed?"

"I am very hard pressed," declared Benton. "I fear that the foe will drive us unless I get reinforcements soon."

Will went forward to the firing line and saw that the foe were getting ready to charge.

In the gloom it was difficult to tell how many of them there were. But it seemed certain that they greatly outnumbered Benton's men and there was danger that the Confederates would be driven.

Will was determined to at least add his individual aid to the hard pressed soldiers in gray.

So he turned Smith over to a guard, and with Canfield and Spotswood and Champneys took up a position on the line and took part in the conflict.

It raged now more hotly than ever.

Benton had sent dispatches to General Longstreet for aid. The position he held was an important outpost. To be driven from it might give the foe an advantage on the morrow.

So Benton was determined to hold it to the last.

Bravely the Confederate soldiers held their position. They repulsed the first charge of the Union troops.

But Benton's face was gloomy, and now he said:

"It looks bad. We have but a few more rounds of ammunition. When that fails us cold steel only will avail."

Again the Union troops came on. It was possible that the Confederates might have held them in check had their ammunition held out.

But now the word went along the line:

"Fix bayonets!"

This was done. The brave Confederate boys sprung out of their trenches. With a wild cheer they went down to the charge.

Down went the gray line with full force. A moment more and they would have been among the Union soldiers.

But just then a fearful volley leaped from the Union ranks. It seemed to wither the Confederate line as a leaf before fire.

The line melted, half reformed and then fell back again.

"My soul! the day is lost!" groaned Will.

"Yes!" said Benton. "All is over!"

But just then a startling thing happened. A great cry went up from the rear of the Confederate line.

A wild thrilling cheer which rose upon the night air with great force. Then out into the flaring light of conflict rode a startling figure.

It was that of a young girl on a black horse. Her hair flaunted in the night breeze and her pale face was more beautiful for its divine pallor. She rode straight over the ridge and behind her were ranks of gray.

For a moment Will Prentiss rubbed his eyes.

Then a wild cry escaped his lips. He recognized that petite figure at once.

"Nell, Nell, my sister!"

It was Nell Prentiss, the girl spy. She was coming to the rescue of Benton's brave boys.

Behind her was the brave young regiment, so nobly and well known in the South, the Virginia Grays. Will thrilled to his finger tips and cried:

"Hurrah! It is the Grays at last! Come on, boys!"

Champneys and Spotswood both joined Will as they ran along the ridge. The next moment Nell was within reach and she reined her horse in at sight of her brother.

"Will," she cried joyfully, "I thought you dead! They said the guerrillas had hung you!"

"And you, Nell," cried Will, "I thought you were a prisoner in the hands of that villain Maydell."

"I escaped!" cried Nell. "And I came across the Grays. They told me you were dead. I took command and we took an oath to avenge you."

Fred Randolph and others embraced Will. The Grays cheered and danced with joy. It was what might be called a happy reunion.

But Benton's men were being driven back from that fatal bayonet charge. Will threw himself in front of the Grays and cried:

"Come on, boys! We'll beat them back."

Down over the ridge went the Grays. They sent volley after volley into the ranks of the foe.

The Union troops were staggered by this new attack by unexpected reinforcements. They had no means of knowing but that there were hundreds of the foe back of the Grays.

The result was that they broke and fell back. Hastily they retired, drawing their cannon away into the darkness.

The battle was over.

The brave regiment had held its ground, and Benton with tears of joy in his eyes took Nell by the hand.

"We owe all to you," he declared. "You saved the day. That was a brave act in riding over that ridge at the head of your men."

"I thought my brother dead," said Nell. "I intended to

take command of the Grays, but now that he is still with us I shall resign in his favor."

Will embraced his sister.

"I feared the worst for you, Nell," he cried, "but all has come out well. We will report to President Davis as soon as possible."

The Grays bivouacked with Benton's men that night. The campfires burned brightly and happy hearts gathered about them.

It is needless to say that the Grays slept well that night.

When daylight came Will met Benton, who had begun to dig fresh intrenchments. The colonel gripped the boy captain's hand.

"You saved this outpost last night, Prentiss," he said. "It is a service to the Confederacy and President Davis will thank you."

A few hours later the Grays were in line marching back to headquarters. The Grays had reason to feel proud of their campaign.

They had accomplished all its objects. Proctor's raiders had been captured and Smith's band of guerrillas broken up.

Maydell was never seen again. He disappeared most mysteriously and his fate was never known. There was a suspicion that Pete Smith could throw light upon the matter. But the guerrilla chief died in prison later on without confession.

The Grays received great praise from President Davis. The battle of Fair Oaks was only a precursor of many other battles and the part taken by the Grays in them will furnish the subject of another story. Until then let us take our leave of Captain Will Prentiss and his Virginia Grays.

THE END.

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